

Repent or Perish

13 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree

⁶Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

February 28, 2016

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Luke 13: 1-9

A Sermon on Theodicy, or in Other Words... “I’ve Got Nothing”

Ginger and I talked on Thursday morning about her filling in at the piano for Elizabeth while she’s up in Washington caring for her daughter. As we were discussing what hymns we would choose for today, she asked me, “So what are you preaching on this week?” I told her the brief synopsis of today’s text about how Jesus is asked to interpret the situation when some really terrible things happen to our good Jewish neighbors. Then I said something like, “Well, I’m going to talk about that, and then ramble on for awhile because I have absolutely no real answers.” We both laughed. It’s true, on this one I’ve got nothing, that is, nothing concrete anyway.

That doesn’t mean we should pack up now and go home. While I may not have answers, what I do think is that this is THE problem, the real one, the one that religion has been trying, rather unsuccessfully, to solve since time began. And just in case you’re wondering, no other discipline has found a truly satisfying answer either. So we, the “we” that includes broadly people of ANY faith, WE of faith have the pesky problem of believing that God might actually love us and want to be involved in our dismal situation as human beings. Actually, I think that helps our situation more than it hurts us. I believe with all my heart that we are in a strange but wonderful relationship with a God who lovingly created humankind, or at least set in motion the possibility for the creation of a human-type species. There’s too much at stake for me not to really. The conditions on this out-of-the-way planet, in a redneck sort of galaxy, that have allowed for humankind, not just to live here, but to flourish, and perhaps to grow so plentiful that

we might spoil it for ourselves makes me think that there are too many variables at stake for it to be mere happenstance that life came into being.

That out of the way, let's get to the problem at hand! There is suffering involved with being human that we cannot, we WILL not escape no matter how healthy or rich or good we are. Bad things happen to the best of people, and the flip side is true as well, good things seem to happen to the worst of the worst. What makes one individual so lucky at life, when another seems to be born into the worst possible circumstances with no way out? We have trouble making sense and meaning out of this kind of system, in part because we also want to think that there is a system.

Does God reward the good and punish the bad? It's difficult to tell, so the best answer we can give is "maybe... or maybe not."

How is God's system designed? I would say, poorly, at best. We can't figure it out, and just when we think we have a handle on it, something happens that ruins the premise of our theory, whatever that theory happens to be.

In some ways, I can sympathize with God's side of the dilemma. As a parent, discipline for children sometimes gets doled out on a reward and punishment system. That's in the parenting manual, right? Reward the good behavior that you want to see continue. Punish the bad behavior – with no TV, no computer games, and no friends over – so that hopefully a connection will be made and the bad behavior will stop. As I might tell other parents, "Good luck with that." I am not sure that system really works. But maybe it's because my consistency for keeping that kind of system going has always been so terrible. I can't keep up with those stupid rewards charts with their gold stars and promises of ice cream. I forget to follow through on a grounding

the very next day. I am the parent who shows way too much mercy, which leads to the ugly injustice of sibling comparison - "That's not how you treated me when I did that." Ugh. I could never be an elementary school teacher. The requirement to keep at it just to maintain the mere appearance of order would be exhausting!

However, I hope that doesn't mean that God's anything like me – just too tired to keep the whole thing going with the exact right amounts of mercy and of justice. I'd hate to think that God just gave up and sat in the corner with a couple boxes of Girl Scout cookies and said, "They're on their own now, it's out of my control."

That's would be a modified Deist model, if you want to put a name to that answer. Thomas Jefferson and the early founding fathers of this country thought that might be the case. God, to them was the brilliant designer, the watchmaker who fashioned and wound the clock, and then started it, sitting back to watch what would happen as time unfolded. "Here's an amazing world for you. Good luck with running it," God said. Logical thinkers like Jefferson thought this made the most sense. There was no evidence to prove that God was still active in the world. They marveled at the engineering, but were not so impressed with the ongoing maintenance. God didn't seem to be stepping in when there were problems, so they presumed that God's involvement was in the beginning, but not so much after. Biblical figures were just human beings trying to make sense out of their own situation. Jefferson admired Jesus – but probably wasn't a strong supporter of venerating Jesus as equal to God. There's some appeal to all this – naturally – but does it explain the whole picture? Probably not!

So what about our other founding father, John Calvin? Where did he stand on all of this? What was his answer? It's a good question for Presbyterians, like us, to ask about the theological

roots that grew into our particular tree. Calvin created a different dilemma with his answer. He imagines God in sovereign control over all things. Not one thing can happen without God's knowledge, or God's influence, or dare I say, God's control. He was *that* person, the one who would say, at absolutely the wrong time, I'm sure, "Now, you know, everything happens for a reason, and that reason is God." But there are times we yearn to hear that. We want to know that God is involved in that sort of detail in our lives. It's quite the opposite of Jefferson's aloof God. Calvin's God is in your business, all the time, every day. One of the times I got in serious hot water for a sermon was using this logic. What would Calvin have said about the terrorist act on the Twin Towers? He would make it plain that God was culpable, and not Islam's God, OUR GOD. And it seems to me that Jesus hints at a similar thing when it comes to the Tower of Siloam. The people killed were no better, no worse than anyone else, but when something bad like that happens, it is an occasion for us to think about our own behaviors and choices. Do we understand what our enemies are trying to tell us about who we are? Have we repented? Are we perishing in our own lives as well? Does Jesus blame God as Calvin would? Technically no – but he reminds us that everyone will perish, so understanding our own mortality is fairly important.

So here we are, between a serious rock and a hard place. As American Presbyterians, we have inherited both Jeffersonian and Calvinist models of interpreting the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Figuring out the true boundaries of God's agency is downright impossible. We're stuck between saying that God has absolutely no agency in the world, and saying that God has complete agency over all things and circumstances. Religion is supposed to help us out on these questions, but our interpretations on this are always obscured. I cannot quite go with either the ALL or the NOTHING. And anytime really that the varied interpretations

range from “all” to “nothing” is a good time to think that you might be dealing with a paradox, those times when two opposing things might be true at the very same time.

That’s where going back to Jesus is the most helpful thing of all. Jesus is at the heart of our spiritual heritage even more so than Jefferson and Calvin might represent our collective mind. Jesus is always so elusive on these types of questions. His answers don’t seem like answers. They avoid the question being asked. He sidesteps what’s being asked in order to put forth his own agenda. A story about a fig tree? Really Jesus? Yeah, I think putting some manure on it is exactly where that story was going. Certainty, the kind of certainty that we humans crave, is not his deal. His only certainties come with actions involved. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Pray for those who persecute you. Follow me. You can’t easily build a systematic theology out of those things. Thank God my theology professor Doug Ottati didn’t hear me say that! As a student who LOVED, LOVED, LOVED the study of all kinds of theologies and their roles in our religious practice, when it comes to the questions that haunt us in the middle of the night, even a really good theology can’t help us escape from that kind of emotional tossing and turning. Only trust and love can.

I can only trust that the God I know is somehow with me in my pain. Knowing that God loves me doesn’t make the pain any less, and doesn’t provide me with any answers that I’m going to get through it, or that it’s going to transform me, or that it won’t kill me. I have to live with that unknown. I have no choice. Sure, I can thank God for whatever and be grateful – Calvin was actually pretty good at that. Or I can wonder at the mysteries of the universe and note my miniscule place in it – Jefferson was actually pretty good at that. But when I’m truly at the crossroads of personal desperation, I want to shake some sense into both of those men, and tell them just where it is they can go with their great and wordy tomes of theological reasoning.

Jesus instead points us toward death – probably because he knew that was his only way out as well. We must die to be reborn. We die a thousand deaths to the things that we know – maybe in practice for the actual one that stops our breathing and sends us to an even scarier unknown. Rather than trying to interpret why suffering happens – consider your own suffering – and whether or not you have made peace with your own mortal being. That’s a more difficult, and dare I say, more mature spiritual path.

Those, like Jesus, who have been revered as being led directly by Holy Spirit, the mystics of all times, places, and religions, and at times the marginalized who are close to death have recognized the truth behind the paradox. God offers us perfect freedom, AND God can be found in all things and through all things. I’m not sure we have to choose a side or make a case for how it all works.

At the black history month celebration at Union Baptist Church yesterday, the music was the message and the musicians were really preaching it! On one hand, it is the Baptist way to remind folks that they are responsible for making the commitment to Jesus completely, or else hell awaits. They offer perfect freedom in that choice, and yet one of the most moving songs the Soul Seekers sang was, “God is in charge of me.” The Israelites having made their pilgrimage from slavery to freedom; black Americans on the journey from slavery, to civil rights, to a recognition that their lives matter continue that story. Bad things are going to happen. Those who are the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the outcast perhaps know this truth in their bones more so than those who have been lucky in life from the get-go. Yet suffering ultimately affects us all. Suffering is a part of life that cannot be avoided or escaped, and yet blessings and mercy come through it from the very hand of our Almighty God. God can take our pain and transform it. We don’t want to think that’s true, but it is. How else could such beautiful,

joyful music arise from the cotton fields? Or as the Franciscan Father, Richard Rohr has been known to say, “We must go down before we even know what UP is.”

So are we Jeffersonian Deists, Calvinist Presbyterians, Franciscans who see God in all things, or soulful Baptists – maybe a little of each, or maybe we simply need different expressions of our religion to complete the whole picture. We aren’t everything on our own. Each expression has both its value and its blind spots. We make mistakes in interpretation. We fail to let Jesus invite us into the question because we have expected Jesus to provide us with answers. Live the questions. Puzzle at Jesus’ understanding. Allow your mind and heart to hold the truth – and for that they both have to be really, really big containers. In God, find perfect freedom. In all things, find God. Amen.

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