
Sermon – 3rd Lent - March 24, 2019
Luke 13:1-9
“Manure Spreaders”

Sometimes you can't help but wonder about the timing of a lesson that comes up on our worship calendar. This week it's Luke 13:1-9 and it's hard to read it and not be amazed how it lines up with the news. It opens with Jesus being asked about a report from Jerusalem that some Galilean Jews were killed while worshipping in the temple. Can you imagine something like that? But the report seems only a pretext for a theological debate. It moved Jesus to ask why the incident was mentioned – out of grief or to make the point that these Galileans were getting out of hand, advocating rebellion against Rome and therefore deserved what Pilate did to them.

Jesus has no time for the latter suggestion obviously. People were dead, people created in God's image, and death should not become the occasion for arguing cause and effect or trying to tie a nice neat theological bow between sin and suffering. In the case of the shooting in New Zealand recently, it was Muslims who died – human beings created in God's image. In the vernacular of Lutheran theology, they were our neighbors. We might say it was Muslims in a mosque this time – it was Jews in a Pittsburg synagogue last time – and since we Christians know about this sort of thing, we know it may well be a church next time. Suffering respects no creed.

But Jesus' questioners are not done. What about the “innocent” suffering of Jews who perished in a construction accident? Not so subtly, this question raises the idea – common in Israel, that anyone who helped out in a Roman building project deserved misfortune. They were working on an aqueduct – Romans loved those things. Ah, but cross lines and cooperate with the enemy, you become the enemy. Does that sound like anything you've heard from the media in general and our nation's capital in particular lately? Jesus' questions in Luke 13:2 and again in 13:4 are the sort that only our Lord can ask – *‘do you think certain people are worse sinners than you’?* There are folks in this life who do risky things, immoral things, or routinely place themselves in bad situations. Jesus understands that. But back to his question – do we think they're greater sinners than we?

What is Jesus doing here? He's exposing our reliance on our behavior and even belief in our beliefs – to condemn us. He's using the law because he's the lawgiver. If we say, *‘we'll yes, I think I'm at least a slightly better person than most, and a heck of a lot better than some’* – then, I must tell you, by Jesus' own words that you're not many shades removed from people who attach live stream cameras to their guns or count an opposing opinion as evil – people who believe in their beliefs to monstrous ends.

Part one of our lesson today - Luke 13:1-5 is pretty tough stuff. But Christ always carves out an opportunity for the good stuff. And the good stuff is Part two of our lesson – Luke 13:6-9. It's a parable – which are notoriously hard to interpret with precision, but here let's give it a try.

The vineyard owner - who do you suppose that is? Shout out an answer? God of course - the creator and owner of heaven and earth who evidently likes a glass of wine now and then. But

there's evidently trouble in paradise, cause for fun or because they go well with wine, this landowner put a fig tree smack in the middle of his vines. But it's not producing. Guesses as to who that tree might be? Perturbed to say the least at "us" he summons his gardener. Let's go for three in a row – who's this? And what does Jesus do on behalf of a poor producing fig tree? Asks for more time to work with them.

Swept up together with the most notorious of law breakers and sufferers in part one and the object of holy ire in part two – we've got one chance. A gardener who doesn't just mind working with poor producers– he'll take the heat for them. And so Christ gets to work, with the oddest of the parable's metaphors – manure. This is tricky - what do you suppose it represents? The gospel of love for sinners - shoveled out and raked in day by day till its effect on you is repentance that leads to forgiveness, life and salvation. But then what? Of the two miracles of baptism - forgiveness of sins and making us members of the church, the latter is probably the tougher of the two for Christ.

Turning our noggins and hearts away from our natural instincts and instead in love toward all whom God calls our neighbors is the taller task of salvation. The old Adam in us keeps wanting to soak up grace and not show much for it. To make matters worse, we try to create space between us and the law by insisting "*well at least I'm not like...*" For that malady I simply refer you back to part one of our story.

Our sin stinks to high heaven. But do you hear your good Lord Jesus say of you "*give me just a little more time*. That is how much he loves you. Remember in the end a Christian doesn't so much grow – as cling – to a Savior Luke tells us carries a bucket and a shovel. When I was a student at Luther Seminary, a professor told us a story about when he was a pastor in Eastern Washington. His bishop's name was Carl, and his wife was Phyllis. Carl knew just about every farmer for miles by the time my professor got to that synod for his first call. Phyllis grew up on one of those farms and tended a pretty mean garden.

One the eve of Phyllis' birthday one April, Bishop Carl arranged for a delivery from one of the local farmers. It arrived that evening late, as planned, and the next morning Carl walked his bride to the window, pulled the shades and there in the front yard, shining with dew in the morning sun was the biggest most beautiful pile of manure you could imagine. "*Happy Birthday honey*", Carl said. With moistened eyes, Phyllis said "*oh Carl, you shouldn't have.*"

There are folks who don't think much of Christians or the church and might say in so many words it's all a bunch of s____. Let 'em have their say. But you might tell 'em to look up Luke 13 some time. Tell 'em to think about what kind of God it is that could easily cut and burn, but keeps digging and spreading love instead, for folks like you, and them, who largely just take up space. And maybe with a wink and a smile tell 'em what a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian, or if you prefer...a manure spreader. AMEN