

## **THE MANURE STORY Luke 13:1-9 (3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent)**

People came to Jesus with the news. Worshipers killed by Pilate during an act of worship. He had mingled their blood with the blood of the sacrificial lambs. God seemed to have approved because heaven remained closed and silent. Jesus mentioned another incident of tragedy. Tower of Siloam collapses killing 18 people.

You see headlines like that all the time and interviews with people who were the survivors. Or the earthquake in Chile may have been the most violent in history at 8:8 on the Richter scale. Or the tsunami that decimated towns along the Chilean coast with no warning given by their Navy. What do you think when you first read or hear of tragic events in our world.

We might think where was God in all this; should we blame him? Or we might think as did the Jews of Jesus day when a disaster, or a death struck, something like this. They were obliged according to the Talmud to finish their story by saying, "Blessed be God who judges rightly." They were not wondering about God, they were wondering about the people who died. They must have been exceptional sinners.

They were not thinking of the sudden and tragic deaths, but for what hidden crimes were these people being punished. They were thinking in terms of Job's friends who told Job, "Don't deny it, you must have been doing something wrong, you must have been sinning. Can you remember a guiltless man who perished, or have you ever seen good people brought to nothing."

So Pilate kills people while they were worshipping, and the tower of Siloam falls and crushes people, more wicked than the rest of us. But in the matter of this text, it is not so. Great evil does not necessarily produce great misfortune. Great goodness does not necessarily produce great fortune. More than we would like to admit hasn't each one of us sinned in "thought, word, and deed," and no one found out, nor were we punished? So our own experience answers the question.

Most of us still believe that some sins are worse than others. We consult our index on the relative evil of sins. The state will put a person in prison for murder. The media will pay thousands, sometimes millions to gossip about that murder to satisfy the lust for gossip of those who condemn the murder but are thrilled by the gossip. Bluntly, gossip is often more destructive than murder. When you consider the death of others as to their wickedness, Jesus explodes, "Except you repent."

Nor will St. Paul let us escape, "I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ." Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them. They were struck down in the wilderness.

Jesus seems to be trying to tell us something. That we're supposed to stop pretending that death, tragic death, is something that comes to only bad people. Jesus is trying to tell us that everybody has a time limit of life on this earth. That instead of postulating all kinds of why questions, which we will do until he comes anyway, because we are human beings, that when the headlines are tragic, it gives an opportunity to look at our own life. For as we discover in the Gospel, even the good die, even those without sin. And that our time on earth is limited and can end at any moment.

I would like to read a poem written by Eldon Weisheit a pastor that I knew in Montgomery Alabama, a mentor to me in many ways. He was a pastor who jogged almost every day of his life at least 3 miles.

But who died the month after he retired while jogging.

“Sometimes it seems that time comes in little boxes. Each box is called a day  
Approximately 30 boxes make a carton, called a month.  
A shipment of 12 cartons is called a year.  
On January first many think they get a whole new shipment of 365 days.  
What a lot of time we have, how rich we are in time!

But think a bit. Are you sure you received a full shipment?  
What if your subscription to time ran out during the year?  
What if you opened a carton and found empty boxes. No more time! No more time!

But you may have a full shipment this year,  
Maybe you have many shipments coming in the future.  
Yet, you will say, I have no time? This is a strange statement.  
People, who say I have no time, always have time.  
Those who have no time are dead. The dead do not mention their lack of time.  
We have to spend our time. When we say we have no time for something, we mean that something is not important enough for our time. We have to spend our time; it won't keep in a bank, not even with a time lock on it.

When you say that you have no time to serve Christ,  
You are saying that you would rather spend your time another way.  
Of course you don't want it to sound that way.  
You mean to say...I'll give time to God later when I have more time.  
But are you sure that you will have more time? What if your next box is...  
(Rev. Eldon Weisheit)

No doubt Jesus seeing the fright in their eyes goes on to tell them and us a story about manure and a fig tree. The story is brief.

The man had a fig tree planted in his front yard. He came to it expecting to find figs but there weren't any. He said to his gardener, “What's going on here? For three years I've come to this tree expecting figs and not one fig have I found. Chop it down! Why waste good ground with it any longer? The gardener said “Let's give it another year. I'll

loosen the ground and dig in manure. Maybe it will produce next year; if it doesn't than chop it down."

The violence of the command "Chop it down!" is a clue to the context. Following Jesus doesn't make for smooth sailing. Traveling with Jesus through Samaria on the way to Jerusalem is not a parade led by a brass band and cart wheeling cheerleaders.

Twice before setting out on the journey Jesus told his followers what they had to look forward to; In the days to come he will be rejected and killed. So they are warned. Jesus meets hostility at many turns on the road. So Luke makes sure that we pay attention to the response that Jesus makes to violence ("chop it down") by placing a blunt, unadorned, Manure story in the narrative.

Manure is not a quick fix. It offers no immediate results; it is going to take a long time to see if it makes any difference. If it's results we're after, chopping down a tree is just the thing: But spreading manure carries none of the exhilaration of fresh starts and new beginnings. It is not dramatic work, nor glamorous work, not work that gets anyone's admiring attention. Manure is a slow solution. Still when it comes to doing something about what is wrong in the world. Jesus is best known for his fondness for the minute, the invisible, the quiet, the slow-yeast salt, and seeds, light. and manure

Manure. The Psalms are prayers worked into the soil of our lives to shape our imaginations and obedience so that we live our lives with the way God works in the world and in us in a world of violence and antipathy without becoming violent. One of the most repeated sentences in scriptures, because we are so impatient to "cut it down and get on with it, is "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his love endures forever." Love never quits.

Manure. God is not in a hurry. We are repeatedly told to "Wait for the Lord." But that is not counsel that is readily accepted by followers of Jesus who have been conditioned by promises of instant gratification whether American or Assyrian. "The greatest temptation of our time is impatience, in its full original meaning refusal to wait, undergo, suffer. We seem unwilling to pay the price of living with our neighbors in creative and profound relationships."

Manure. Silence. Manure means reentering the conditions of "Let it be done to me", submitting to the silent energies that change death into life, the energies of resurrection. Language consists of equal parts of speaking and silence. Saul Bellows comments. "the more you keep your mouth shut, the more fertile you become."

God is a God who acts. We are constantly called on to pay attention to "his wonderful works to the children of men". But he is also a God who waits: "The lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance". Anyone who spends time walking with Jesus must learn to put up with this slowness, as some count slowness.

A few days after this story had entered the imagination of the company of men and women who were following Jesus, Jesus entered Jerusalem. Before the week was out, he was hanging on the cross.

Pilate and Caiaphas in an unholy alliance agreed that Jesus had to go; he was a threat to the precarious peace that the Roman army was trying to preserve. He was a threat to the highly profitable business that Caiaphas and his Saducean henchmen were running from the Jerusalem temple. He was taking up ground needed for their own purposes. And so they killed him. They eliminated both him and his kingdom from this earth. Or so they thought. Jesus responded to their hostile violence with a word out of the Manure story, this parable that he had just told them a few days earlier on the road through Samaria. Hanging from the cross, Jesus first words were a prayer, "Father forgive them."

OUR TRANSLATIONS OBSCURE THE IDENTITY OF THIS WORD THAT Jesus prayed from the cross with Jesus word in the manure story and the fig tree. The farmer's orders "chop it down" is echoed in the Holy Week's "Crucify Him". Jesus' prayer to the Father "Forgive them" is a verbatim repetition of the gardener's intervention. "Let it alone". The Greek word is *aphes*. In some contexts it means "Hands off...Cool it...Leave it alone". In other contexts having to do with sin and guilt it means "Forgive..Remit". It is the word used in the prayer Jesus taught us, "Forgive us our sins" Here the contexts of parable and prayer converge.

The violence intended for the fig tree is deflected by the gardener's "Let it alone." The violence visited on Jesus is countered by "Father, forgive them."

For those of us who are up to our necks in manure, which is to say, up to our necks in forgiveness, it is perhaps important for us to note that the forgiveness Jesus prayer for us was not preceded by any confession or acknowledgement of wrong doing by the crucifixion crowd or any of us since. Preemptive forgiveness. Jesus prays that we be forgiven before we have any idea that we need it. "For they know not what they do." No preconditions. Amazing grace. We have time, we're still alive, the gardener is digging around us with his love and spreading the manure of forgiveness all over the dead treeness of our life and in his care and intervention in our lives we will bear fruit! We still have time to repent. Thanks be to God.

David E. Hinck, Pastor FGS