

## LIKE A WATERED GARDEN *Put Manure on It*

a prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
Dayton, Ohio

### Luke 13:1-9

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.'*

*Then 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. So 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?" He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'*

***['The Gardener] replied, "Sir, let [the fig tree] alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."'***

Luke 13:8-9

It seems that the bad news just keeps rolling in. We've seen the horror and carnage of two devastating earthquakes, one in Haiti and the other in Chile. News about bloody violence from guns and bombs continues to drip around us like a leaky faucet, whether it is another bombing in Iraq (yesterday at a Shi'ite Shrine), or at the Pentagon in Washington DC, where a mentally ill man made his last stand, or on our own county roads, where two men were shot dead two Fridays ago along Bear Creek and Germantown Liberty Road, apparently for no reason other than robbery.

And of course the bad news has seemed a lot more personal lately too, so close to home. Both Roselin Runnels and Gary Dasner lost a beloved parent, and Corinne Rogers lost her beloved 15-year old son through suicide, and my friend and clergy colleague Rev. Amy Mears lost her 8-year old daughter through a car crash with a deer on Ash Wednesday in Nashville, TN.

Death and destruction are all around us. Sometimes death is caused by human choices and intention. At other times it is marked by the processes of nature and the seeming randomness of our existence here on earth. And when death catches our attention, or brings us up short, it is normal for us to go looking for meaning...to try to make sense out of death and awful situations of all kinds. This is nothing new. It was even true in the time of Jesus. It is true now. And one awful way that people have dealt with death and devastation, both then and now, is to assume that it was the victim's fault; that they somehow brought death and destruction upon themselves because of their sin; that somehow it was God's will and doing that they died.

In today's gospel reading, some people come to Jesus horrified about the news that Pontius Pilate had massacred a group of Galileans as they prayed in the temple. And to heighten the horror and the brutality of this situation, the gospel writer using graphic imagery, says that their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices they had come to offer. They had to come to worship and they were shot down in their prayers. Why Jesus? Why did this happen?

Well, some would have said that they cut down because they were political radicals and religious zealots. Some would have said that they brought it on themselves. Jesus, what do you say? Do you think they brought this death upon themselves? "No," Jesus says emphatically, "Do you think that those Galileans died because in some way they deserved it? No, I tell you. NO!"

Jesus couldn't be clearer about this! When it comes to any notion that somehow disaster and death equals deserving, or tragedy and horror equals God's punishment, Jesus says "No!" To make his point even clearer, Jesus tells of another terrible disaster. The story *he* tells is not about *intentional* violence caused by humans, but about *accidental* violence. What about "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?" Again, Jesus is clear: "No, I tell you."

All of this makes me wonder what Jesus would say to the rightwing preachers and purveyors of our day who are quick to announce God's judgment and destruction. It wasn't too long ago that the late Jerry Falwell (God rest his soul!) said that terrorists attacks on September 11 were a direct result of

the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way -- all of them who have tried to secularize America -- I point the finger in their face and say "you helped this happen."

It was Pat Robertson who not too long ago warned about "gay days" at Disney World:

I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you. This is not a message of hate - - this is a message of redemption. But a condition like this will bring about the destruction of your nation. It'll bring about terrorist bombs; it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor.

And it was this same Pat Robertson who said just weeks ago, in response to the earthquake in Haiti:

Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it. Haitians were originally under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon the third, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you will get us free from the French. True story. And so, the devil said, okay it's a deal. Ever since they have been cursed by one thing after the other.

And these are just the public statements of preachers with a bully pulpit and a national microphone! However, this is the kind of thinking...these are the kind of things said from supposedly Christian pulpits all across America. These are the kinds of things said everyday by well meaning Christians. And all of this kind of talk makes me wonder: Do these Christians ever read the words of Jesus?

Of course, I am not immune from such thinking. Sometimes I ignore Jesus too. When someone I love and care about deeply suffers from some horrible situation, something in me automatically wants to cry out to God: "God, why this? God, why did you allow this to happen? God, this isn't fair. God, lighten up please...enough already!" I really don't know why I react this way, and rush to question God's goodness and fairness, except that I grew up being told repeatedly that death and destruction were somehow related to God's actions and punishment. And shaking such notions are never easy, especially when they have been beat in your head and fed to you like milk from the teat. But Jesus says, "No! Disaster and death does not equal deserving, tragedy and horror does not equate to God's punishment. NO!"

In this little text he said it twice. But he also said it once to his disciples about a man born blind. He said that his blindness was no body's fault. On another occasion he noted that "It rains on the just and the unjust." To any notion that disaster and death equals deserving...that tragedy and horror equals God's judgment or punishment, Jesus says "NO! Absolutely not!"

Paul Duke notes that Jesus, having said this,

Makes a sharp, unexpected turn. Having rejected the notion that tragedy is vengeance, he doesn't do what I would have done. I'd have said some words of consolation about those who do suffer. I'd have said suffering is a mystery and God suffers too. And if anyone in the room was hurting over all this, I just might have given them a hug. Here's what said: "But unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Do you think these victims of tragedy got killed because they were the worst? No. But unless you turn your life,

you'll die too." So much for the pastoral approach.

What's he doing? He is taking a truth and turning it to show us its other side. The top side of the truth he's just told is: tragedy doesn't equal judgment. Now have a look at the bottom side of the same truth: the absence of tragedy says nothing about how we're really doing. We assume that wherever the bombs are exploding and the bullets are flying, or wherever cancer is advancing or earthquakes are shaking the foundation, the people there are in crisis. Jesus looks eyes with us who are not in such places and invites us to consider that perhaps we are in crisis. We like to guess at meanings carried by catastrophic events. Has it occurred to us to wonder at the meaning of ordinary days? (Paul Duke, "Spared," a sermon offered at the First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 14, 2004)

Death and destruction and horror and tragedy does not equal deserving or God's judgment, Jesus says. Did you hear that sisters and brothers? Just in case you didn't hear it, I'll say it again: Jesus says that death and destruction and tragedy and horror does not equal deserving or God's judgment. Got it? GOT IT? Can I get a big Baptist "Amen?" But, BUT Jesus says, "*but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.*" What? Why in the world did he say that?

Jesus refuses to make assumptions or cast aspersions about the cause and meaning of death and destruction however we find it. He certainly does not want to put God in the role of killer or murderer or death maker. But he is trying to redirect our focus. Instead of worrying about or wallowing in the meaning or cause of death and tragedy, Jesus asks us to *repent*. To repent!

Now I know that is a strange word to our ears and tends to get stuck in our throats like dust. I know it is a word that you think may have had meaning in the past, but it doesn't have much use for our lives today. But I hope you will reconsider this word today, and welcome it as a friend, and not reject it as an enemy. I hope you will welcome it as an important spiritual practice, not as an archaic, albeit painful, expression of religious guilt from your past. "To repent" is simply to turn around, to reverse direction, to reorient our lives, to acknowledge the presence and action of God's goodness in the world, to center our lives in God's grace. To repent is at the heart of our Lenten discipline. And unless we repent from our death-dealing, destructive ways, unless we repent from self-isolation and self-absorption and selfishness, unless we repent from our "It is all about me attitude and actions", unless we repent from our greed, our care-less-ness, and our refusal to love and to forgive, unless we repent and stop seeking ultimate love and hope in things and people that can never satisfy the way God's sustaining presence and power can, unless we repent, Jesus says, we will perish horribly, too. We'll die if we don't turn around and repent.

Again Paul Duke:

To get us scratching our heads over that, [Jesus] tells one of those strange stories he told that we call parables. "A man had planted a fig tree in his vineyard. He expected it to grow figs, but it didn't. Finally he says to his hired hand, 'For three years now I've looked for figs on this thing and never see a one. Cut it down. Why should it waste good soil?'"

Time out for our first lesson in Palestinian Horticulture 101: Fig trees in Palestine are prodigiously fruitful. Normally one tree bears three whole crops per year. This tree, going fig-less for three years when the grower was expecting fruit, has actually gone through nine harvest cycles just waving leaves. Of course he wants it removed. He's in business. He can't afford for good ground to be unproductive. Cut it down.

The story isn't finished, but let's freeze frame it for just a moment. This tree, obviously, is a metaphor for human beings with whom God has a problem. But Jesus chose his metaphors carefully. Please notice what this one suggests about his understanding of human failure. The failure of this tree is not in doing anything wicked. This is not a hateful tree or a nasty tree or a heretic tree. Its failure is that it stands in the sun on a choice piece of ground drinking up nourishment and yet never yields what gives goodness, sweetness, and life back into the world.

The church has a long sad history of trivializing what the Bible calls sin, locating it mostly in the breaking of certain laws. It's been right peculiar which ones we've emphasized, which ones we minimized, and which ones we just made up. But in the teaching of Jesus

the image of human sin most often set forth is the fundamental failure to do good. The greatest tragedy of our living is the refusal to grow into our purpose and pour forth what is good and life-giving. Like the fig tree, we've been set down on a sunny slope of the garden, absorbing so many rich resources as we hold on to our privileged place. The unthinkable is to give back no joy, no love, no life-giving goodness for someone else's sake, to live fruitless lives.

In Jesus' story the tree that refuses its purpose of life-giving good fruit no longer deserves its place in the garden. The owner reaches for the ax. But then a strange thing happens. The [gardener] leaps up and tells the owner: "Wait!" He goes into a chorus of something like "Woodman, Spare that Tree!" "Give it one more year," he says; "Let me work the ground and fertilize and cultivate and give this tree every conceivable advantage. If it doesn't bear fruit by next year, then cut it down."

Time out for lesson #2 in Palestinian Horticulture. A fig tree is those parts doesn't need any care at all. Its root system is incredibly equipped to gather nourishment. It thrives on neglect. Nobody fertilized fig trees, any more than you'd have to fertilize dandelions. But here's one crazy gardener so devoted to one miserably failed tree that he'll pour un-required care on it just to see it bloom into what it was meant to be.

To our ears the story may not seem particularly startling. But Jesus' audience would have been surprised by it. All the more so because, as it happens, there was a folktale back then, that went like this: There was once a palm tree that didn't bear fruit. The owner kept looking for fruit but always found none. Finally he came to chop it down. But the tree spoke: "Don't cut me down! Transplant me to a better place, and I'll be fruitful." To which the owner said, "If you haven't done it yet you never will." And he leveled it.

Jesus just wasn't the kind to tell a story with a talking plant. He was the kind to load the surprise of a story into someone's wildly unexpected extravagance. Here is a gardener incredibly willing to love a useless, [broken] tree toward its purpose...

(Paul Duke, "Spared," a sermon offered at the First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, Michigan, March 14, 2004)

Have you noticed what Jesus has done here? He started with the question: "Does tragedy equal punishment? But he reverses that question and asks: "Instead of seeking meaning in death and disaster that you may never find, what does it mean for you and your life NOW that the ax has not fallen? When your days are ordinary and mundane, when you are not walking so consciously in the shadow of death, when disaster and horror is not upon you, what is your life's meaning and purpose? Perhaps such days are in truth an amazing grace. Perhaps they are in fact bathed in amazing love and beauty. Perhaps they are a reflection of a lavish and extraordinary opportunity. Perhaps these are the ONLY days you are given to take hold of God's love and goodness. Perhaps right NOW is the time to avail yourself to God's wonderful amazement and abundant life and to get busy becoming what you were truly meant to be; to become a bearer of God's extravagant goodness, gifts, grace and love in the world. In short, perhaps NOW is the time for you to bear fruit. The good news...the urgent news of this text...is that we've been granted some time...no one knows how long or why...to bear some good and tasty and mouthwatering fruit. Perhaps NOW is the time to turn and seize our promise in God:

*If you get rid of unfair practices, quit blaming victims, quit gossiping about other people's sins, if you are generous with the hungry and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out, your lives will begin to glow in the darkness, your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight. I will always show you where to go. I'll give you a full life in the emptiest of places – firm muscles, strong bones. You'll be like a well-watered garden, a gurgling spring that never runs dry. You'll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew, rebuild the foundations from out of your past. You'll be known as those who can fix anything, restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate, make the community livable again.*

Friends, let us garden well, let us bear good fruit, even if it means we have to put some manure on it. Amen.