

“Manure Happens”

Luke 13: 1-9

“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. . . .

Then he told them 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 around it and put manure on it.*

If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

He was murdered while making an offering.

Thirty years ago this month, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador was saying a funeral mass in the chapel of the small cancer hospital where he lived. In the weeks before, Romero had become even more outspoken in challenging El Salvador’s military government and its death squads, calling on them as Christians to stop repressing and killing their own people. Amid the mounting death threats intended to silence him, Romero told a reporter, “I have frequently been threatened with death. I must say that, as a Christian, I do not believe in death without resurrection. If they kill me, I shall rise again in the Salvadoran people.”

As he said mass that evening in the small chapel of the cancer hospital, Romero reminded the congregation of words from the Gospel of John: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.”

Moments later, as he was lifting the chalice in offering to celebrate Holy Communion, a single gunman walked into the back of the sanctuary and shot Romero through the heart. Romero collapsed to the floor and died behind the altar. His blood mingled with that of the spilled sacrificial cup of Christ.

They were murdered while making an offering.

A group of people tells Jesus the news: “Jesus, did you hear? A group of Galileans, people from Galilee, were at worship, they were making their sacrificial offerings to God, when suddenly a squad of soldiers from that tyrant Governor Pilate showed up and slaughtered them right then and there. Mixed their blood with the blood of the sacrifices as they died. Just terrible! Murdered them in church!”

Then one among the crowd must have wondered aloud what the Galileans had done to deserve such a thing – and that’s the comment that sets Jesus off.

Jesus basically says, “Deserve? Do you really think that those Galileans were worse sinners than any other Galileans, and that that is why this happened to them? Because God was somehow punishing them- because they deserved this? Or do you really think that when that building, that tower crashed down and crushed all those people beneath the rubble not too long ago – you know, the tower at Siloam- do you really think that those poor people deserved that any more than anyone else in Jerusalem? Geez, you guys sound like Pat Robertson – I don’t need any more of that kind of help!”

Jesus is speaking to a people who seem to believe that it is God’s job to punish evil and reward good, to make sure the cosmic cause and effect checkbook balances. Bad things should happen to bad people, and good things should happen to good

people. Those at the front of the line should go first, and those at the back of the line should go last. They think the world should be a spiritual meritocracy where life accurately metes out the A's and the F's, the carrots and the sticks.

And who among us doesn't believe that, too? We think that's God's job, to make sure this life is fair: God's supposed to make sure that the righteous prosper, and that the sinners are the ones who suffer. We talk a good sophisticated theology of God's love and mercy, but so often in practice, we're believers in the straightforward equation of the book of Deuteronomy: where sin = curses, obedience = blessings. That's why, whenever many of us do something wrong, somewhere inside of us we're just waiting for the other shoe to drop, for the curse to catch up to us. That's why we ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this?" over even some small things and really search for an answer: we seek answers to anguished trivial questions like, "As a UNC Grad, what did I do O Lord to be Duke's pulpit on THIS Sunday of all Sundays?" (*After the Blue Devils basketball team crushed the Tar Heels just last night.*)

We ask these things: Or, alternately, when we do right we can't shake our sense of entitlement, our justified reward, the feeling that our selflessness has earned us something. Many of us think that just our presence here this morning in pew or pulpit means we are deserving of some heavenly benediction on our projects: or at least divine protection.

Sometimes we don't believe in God so much as we believe in karma. We think God is the great impartial moral referee who is just there to enforce the rules, call the fouls, and keep score. We think the world should be a kind of machine of moral metronomic consistency, where to pull lever A will always result in consequence B.

Unfortunately, or is it fortunately, that's not the God we've got, nor the world we've got. We've got a God who in this world at least, makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, who sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. We've got a God who pays the workers who arrive at the end of the day the same wages as those who have worked all day long - and who even pays the slackers first. We've got a God in Jesus Christ who forgives murderers and consorts with adulterers while reproofing Pharisees and disciplining saints. We've got a God who in mystery withholds for a time the just judgment that we seek, who seems willing to let the weeds and the wheat grow together: and whose extreme patience and restraint and mercy sometimes seem to border on the negligent, or even the senile.

And while it's true that often one reaps what one sows in this world, it's also true that sometimes you can sow, and sow, and sow, and reap only the whirlwind. And there are other times, as Jesus tells his disciples, where we reap from fields where we sowed nary a seed, where the bumper crop is all gift, where the fruit appears despite the farmer, not because of us.

It's hard enough to fathom the messy mysteries of cause and effect that we encounter each day, but when it comes to terrible suffering in particular, the well is deep and it feels like we have no bucket. In the face of suffering and pain, as Nicolas Wolterstorff has written, our net of meaning is too small.

And yet that doesn't stop us from taking our little buckets and our little nets and trying to make the best meaning of suffering as we can. As human beings we are desperate for answers. We fear living in incomprehensible mystery. We feel a frantic need to be able to tell a coherent story about our suffering, with a plot that can be followed: of course we do. And so, to glean meaning from the seeming madness of our pain, some part of us thinks we have to explain, and often explaining means that we have to assign blame- or else risk belief in a universe where there seems to be only moral chaos. And so those murdered Galileans must be worse sinners than all other Galileans: that must be why that happened. And those people crushed beneath the tower of Siloam must have had it coming to them. And so we think that the murders and the tower and the earthquake or the miscarriage or the accident or the illness must all have to do either just desserts or with God somehow- because it is somehow easier for us to believe in an angry God or an indifferent God than it is to accept a God of love whose ways are yet not our ways, and whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose love is not our love, and whose justice, at least in this world, is not our justice.

But what if God is not the Almighty Actuary? What if God is not the Cosmic Cop? What if God is not just an infinite insurance policy guaranteeing that our righteousness will be rewarded?

What if, instead, the reason behind so much of our world's suffering is simply the fact that despite our desperate attempts to persuade ourselves otherwise, we really do live in a world that is somehow fallen, somehow broken, somehow in

desperate need of redemption? What if we live in a fallen world where there is not a straight line between the judgments of creation and the judgments of God, that requires us to pray from our bones, ‘thy will please be done on earth as it is in heaven?’ What if suffering is not always a direct message, a Rorschach inkblot test of where you must describe the meaning you, but that sometimes it is just a general, flashing warning light that we are made for more than this world as it is has to offer? And what if that is why bad things sometimes happen to unsuspecting people both good and less good, why sometimes the wicked prosper while a saint is assassinated in a sanctuary?

Living in a fallen world, to paraphrase the Alabama theologian Forrest Gump, sometimes **“Manure . . . happens.”**

Sometimes, manure . . . just . . . happens.

You can make meaning out of it perhaps, but it is still just manure.

“Do you think because those Galileans died in church that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?,” Jesus says. “Do you think they deserved that manure? Or do you think those people crushed beneath the rubble suffered in that way because they were worse sinners than anybody else . . . than you? Talk about a load of manure! NO, I tell you. NO.”

But Jesus does not stop there. He does not allow us to walk away with a smug sense of complacency, our security confirmed, our existential questions satisfied, as if these tragedies had nothing to do with us. No. Apparently that bell tolls for thee and for me as well.

“Unless you repent,” Jesus says, “you will all perish as they did.” “Unless you repent, your own death or suffering will be just as much a shock to you as it was to those people.”

It’s not so much a threat, as it is a diagnosis.

The modern world can delude us sometimes into thinking that we really do have life under manageable control. Diseases can be cured. Sensible precautions and wise laws can safeguard against tragedy. Building inspections can keep towers from falling. Economic shifts can be predicted. “We’re intelligent, modern people here! We can handle things.”

But there are these moments where we catch a glimpse that maybe our lives are far more fragile and precarious than we ever believed. Moments of vulnerability that overcome us after violence has occurred, or towers have fallen, or the earth has shook, or when we get sick. Moments where we face the stark and even terrifying reality that, despite our well-manicured lawns, our carefully laid-out streets, our five year plans, and our advanced technology at the push of a button, that we are not as in control as we think. Moments where we realize that our money or our power or our connections or whatever else cannot save us: that living in our little North American gated community cannot insulate us from the forces of sin, tragedy, and death.

“Unless you repent,” Jesus says, “you will all perish just as unsuspectingly as they did.” Jesus is not trying to scare us, but just trying to tell us the truth. He’s trying to blow the whistle on the elaborate cover-up of our precariousness. He’s trying to puncture a dangerous artificial bubble of security before we invest everything we have in it and then lose it all.

And we don’t want to hear that. Here we were gliding along thinking we were built on a solid foundation, but Jesus comes to tell us that we are sitting along a shifting fault line. Don’t you just want to send people away who tell you things like that? Here we were thinking that we were these towers of strength, as solid as Duke Chapel’s Bell-Tower, only to have Jesus tell us that our lives really look like the last turn of a game of Jenga. Don’t human beings just want to shut up or even kill people like that? It’s no wonder this man is going to get hung from a cross.

But Jesus tells us anyway. He knows that the manure that happens in a fallen world has one powerful side-effect: it creates clarity about what matters. Encountered tragedy tears open a holy space in us where we feel and know the fragility and precariousness of our lives in a fallen world.

And when you feel that, Jesus says, it is a moment of truth. It is a reality check. Let it lead you to repent.

By repent, Jesus doesn't mean you roll around on the ground groveling before an angry God. No, a better translation for the word "repent" is to "rethink" your life. To rethink reality. In that open, fragile, vulnerable space, Rethink your life. Rethink where your ultimate security lies. Know that the bell is tolling for you, and let it change how you think about the world we fit into, about what life is about, about God.

Having opened the fragile and vulnerable space within us, having called us to this repentance, Jesus leaves us with this curious open-ended story.

Once there was a man who planted a fig tree in his vineyard. He digs and digs and works and works to get that fig tree into the ground. And year after year he waits, and waits, and waits for the fig tree to bear fruit. He loves figs - there is nothing sweeter, more delightful than a fig. So he watches that fig tree grow every day, and he dreams about the figs. If he was a pious man, he let the fig tree grow for three years before he even started looking for fruit - and this man has waited for another three years on top of that. Day after day he comes craning his neck, looking for that first fig . . . almost tasting it on his tongue in anticipation . . . and nothing. Nothing.

And how long can you wait? How long can you wait, with a fig tree, with a church, with a job, with an addict, with a marriage, with a life that is bearing no fruit? How long can you wait?

That fig tree is just taking, and taking, and taking from the earth: never giving anything back. Pretty much the way we often treat the earth. That fig tree is just sucking up all resources of the soil, absorbing all the nutrients and moisture of the dirt - it's like a cancer in the vineyard, not leaving enough for the other plants. The grape vines are all crying out to the vineyard owner, "How long, O Lord? How long are we going to have to live with this fig tree?"

That fig tree is not just an innocent waste of space, it's harming the vineyard.

And day after day after day, for twice as long as the tree needed to bear fruit, the vineyard owner frisks the tree for any sign of a fig, and he listens to the vines calling out, calling out for some relief. Finally he tells the gardener, "Just cut the thing down. Just grab the chainsaw and let's at least make some firewood out of this so-called fig tree - that's apparently the only thing we're going to get out of it. At least now it can't do any more harm."

But there is this gardener. And the gardener says, "Lord, let's wait - let's wait one more year. Let me dig around it and work with it. There is this manure that has happened (because manure happens) there is this manure that has happened over here, apart from the tree, but I can work with that - I can use that- we can connect the tree with the manure, make compost fertilizer out of that manure and put it around the tree, so that both the tree and the manure can have new life. We don't let anything go to waste around this vineyard: maybe I can use some of this manure to help this tree make some figs."

I have these times - do you have these times? - where you look at this world, and you see all that is wrong with it, you see all the manure that happens, you see a Romero gunned down, you watch a little Haitian girl get pulled from the rubble only to die for lack of medical care, you see people who just take and take and take and never give anything back and harm others and almost seem rewarded for it, and you look at the world and almost want to say, "Cut it down. Just cut it down and start over."

Sometimes I look at the struggles of my United Methodist Church, especially some of the impressions of Christ that we have given to others, and I almost am tempted to say, "Just cut it down. Just cut it down and start over."

Or maybe some folks even look at their lives sometimes, and it seems barren, it's just not bearing any fruit, and they wonder if it ever will, it's a fig tree without figs, and they wonder if it would even matter if it were just cut down.

God looked at this world, at us, at this struggling fig tree, and maybe within the heart of the Trinity there was a debate about whether to work with it or just to cut it down and start over.

The question is settled when Jesus comes to the vineyard. Instead of cutting down the tree, he allows himself to be cut down on a tree. He will be another Galilean whose blood Pilate mingles with the sacrifice of his life. And there, upon the cross, as he offers his life, the whole tower of our sinfulness, the whole weary weight of our brokenness, pain, and tragedy comes crashing down upon his head.

He was murdered making an offering. Manure. Just manure.

But we don't believe in death without resurrection. On the third day, Mary comes to the tomb and there he is, alive: the first fruits of a new, unfallen creation.

The world now lives on his gift of borrowed time. The single grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies - and now, here, here, is all this fruit. Figs.

God did this with Christ's death: God can do it with our world, with our church, with our lives.

Repent, rethink it all. Manure happens - but Christ of the composted cross can work with that.

When Mary encountered the risen Jesus at the tomb on that first Easter morning,
in her shock,
she at first mistakes him
for the gardener.

Mary wasn't mistaken.

Thanks be to God. Amen.