

Rich Food and Fruitful Trees
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“Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters.” But, we say,
“There’s no such thing as a free lunch.”
“You that have no money, come, buy and eat!” But, we say,
“You get what you pay for.”
“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return empty.” But, we say,
“What’s goes around, comes around.”
“God will abundantly pardon.” But, we say,
“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”
“Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No!”
But, we say, “She (or he) was asking for it; they got what they deserved, didn’t they?”
“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts
than your thoughts.” And we say, “How could God let this happen?”

We are in a conversation with Scripture, which often seems to be in conversation with itself. With many other people throughout the ages, we turn to our tradition to make sense of the world in some way; to help us cope with disappointment, injustice and tragedy; to give us signposts to the future. But we hesitate to accept the wisdom that might be found there, perhaps hampered by a mixture of cynicism, fear, and inadequacy.

Well, we share those feelings with others who have gone before us, including the people of first century Galilee. In the passage from Luke, Jesus is asked to comment on a recent tragedy at the Temple in Jerusalem, when Galilean worshippers were killed by Roman troops. We can think of many parallel tragedies in our own times. Pilgrims killed by suicide bombers on holy days. Sikhs shot in their temples; children in their schools. Was this some kind of punishment for sin? Did they deserve to die in this way? Jesus brings up the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem: perhaps a natural disaster, perhaps “human error”. Were the dead especially sinful people? Jesus is emphatic: those Galilean worshippers and those poor people caught in the rubble were no better or worse than any of us. Each of us will face death. None of us can predict when. There is no absolute guarantee of safety, no insurance policy. We will all perish, but he says, **you** have the opportunity to change. You have time, that most precious resource. A hard response to tragedy, but true.

With those first century folks, we might have wanted a more definitive answer. When we are confronted with tragedy and injustice, we want answers; and whether the answer is true or not may not matter because having an answer feels better than uncertainty.

As so often happens, Jesus delivers a new way of thinking; a “slantwise” answer. First, he makes it clear that this is not an “Us vs. Them” opportunity. It is not a time to draw lines between sinners and saints. In fact, it is a time to put ourselves in the shoes of those who died so suddenly. It is a time to repent of the complacent assumption that we are OK and others are not.

I don't have to tell you that some religious folks today still make those assumptions when epic tragedies occur. They might say that hurricanes or acts of terrorism are God's punishment for some people's sins: because New Orleans was a dissolute city, it was destroyed; because Christianity is not taught in public school, a public school was attacked. Our Gospel story today speaks the Gospel truth: the God Jesus worshipped does not kill the innocent as a teaching strategy.

Jesus follows his difficult sayings about repenting and perishing with a parable. He asks his listeners to picture a barren fig tree, planted in a vineyard. Now, I have been reading about fig trees and their cultivation. Wild fig trees require the activity of a fig wasp to survive and reproduce. But, over 11,000 years ago, humans got involved and cultivated a mutation of the fig tree, which does not require a wasp to for fruition. But it can only propagate with human intervention: by cutting and grafting. The fig tree in the parable was taken, by human hands, from a prized, fruitful, mature tree and planted in this vineyard. We might wonder, what happened in this tree's past to keep it from bearing fruit? Or was it just too young: it takes several years for a planting to become fruitful.

It is tempting to make a simple allegory out of the parable. God is the owner of the vineyard, impatient with the fruitless tree. Jesus is the gardener who pleads for one more year of time. We are the tree, that must yield or be axed. But I find that this propagates some unfortunate stereotypes. God and Jesus are pitted against each other: God is angry, Jesus is patient. We are passive, waiting for the axe.

Parables are more nuanced than that. We can allow our minds to travel more freely between characters. Sometimes I feel like the vineyard owner: frustrated and irritated when plans are not working out. Whether it is internal or external, I'd like to get rid of this impediment and start over. Sometimes we might feel like the fig tree. Life seems dormant, we are just taking up valuable space without being productive. We need a little nourishment, a little TLC. We hope we'll bear fruit soon, but we need something from the outside to make that happen. Sometimes though, like the gardener, we see hope. This tree is not a waste, it is not a failure. It needs an extra year of maturity, plus attention and compost and manure (I'll leave it to you to decide what compost and manure might be in a spiritual sense).

We are invited by this parable to consider God's overflowing love and mercy in the gift of time. Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had proclaimed "The year of the Lord's favor." We are given time for forgiveness, healing, and second chances.

Jesus uses the word "repent" many times. The Hebrew prophets would have said, "Return." It's the same call: a call to turn around, change direction. In the New Testament the word is "metanoia": a change of heart and mind. Turn from the wisdom of this world, from simplistic understandings of abundance and satisfaction, of good and evil and punishment, to something new and refreshing from God.

Repentance means turning around, and we tend to focus on the life we turn away from. But let's think in terms of transformation, of future possibilities. Let's think in natural terms, just as Jesus did. When a caterpillar becomes a butterfly, the emphasis is on what it turns into, not what it turned from. So when Jesus says "Repent," he is not so much saying, "Turn from sin," he's saying, "Turn to God." Repentance is the gateway to joy; an invitation, not condemnation.

This is almost too hard for us to believe, we who have been brought up on the world's logic. We are used to thinking of repentance in terms of guilt, ours and other people's. We are all too aware of how some preachers and other church authorities down through the years have used the creation and manipulation of guilt to exercise power and control over others. But here we have a deeper understanding of God's love and justice. Isaiah shocks us with the invitation to the table. Jesus surprises his listeners with a story about mercy after the news reports of tragedy. He does not use the parable as a club with which to beat his followers. But he is warning against a smugness and complacency which kills the spirit and prevents us from feeling compassion for others. The fig tree is a good metaphor for us. Given a chance for a realistic and healthy repentance, we, too, will be able to bear the fruits of love and compassion.

When the present moment is static, a gridlock, repentance offers a way out. Our minds get stuck in the perceived realities of today, and we continue to go shopping in the marketplace of expensive and outworn thinking. Isaiah and Jesus offer us the economy of the Kingdom of God, which is beyond price, beyond bargaining.

But we should not assume that repentance involves becoming something we are not. The fig tree is still a fig tree. God never expected us to be anything else, except to fruitfully be who we are. Even the pain and mistakes and failure of the past can be composted into food for our growth. Under the hand of the Gardener, the hand of grace, we can flourish in the time we are given.

Our Scriptures today are full of questions. But they are really invitations posing as questions. We are invited to engage more fully in a spiritual conversation with the One whose ways are not our ways. We are invited to drink deeply from the well of free grace. We are invited to feast at a table of rich mercy. And we are invited into a new community, a new economy, where the free gifts we have received are joyfully shared with each neighbor and each stranger. Amen.