

The Holy Gardener

This morning's Gospel lesson reads like something we might hear on the 6 o'clock news. But instead of an unsuspecting church in Charleston, a group of Galilean worshippers, of unknown size, are tragically slain by Pilate's soldiers at the Temple in Jerusalem. Is nothing truly sacred in our world?

We are not sure of the identity of those reporting this news to Jesus. But Jesus already is familiar with the tragic story and is prepared to engage them. But what exactly is their question? It is not stated clearly. Jesus' response at first glance sounds judgmental and even condemning unless you believe that Jesus was trying to dig for the deeper question. It was a commonly held belief in Jesus' day that if something bad happened to you, even if it was tragic, that it was somehow directly connected to a personal sin that you had committed, and therefore you were being justly punished for it.

Jesus is always interested in getting at our inner motivations for why we humans do what we do and to surface what is contained in the depths of our struggles. Jesus is not satisfied with reading only the sensationalized headlines. He wants the back story. The question behind every question is often heard to discern. When horrible things happen often we try to understand why it happened, who is responsible, and will it happen to me? However, if we are honest, often we are only secondarily concerned if we can help those who are harmed or hurting.

Perhaps these reporters were just ordinary folks like you and I hoping Jesus would help make sense of a nonsensical situation. We will never know for sure. Interestingly, Jesus does not tell these unnamed reporters why the murders occurred. But he answers as if he knows what they are thinking: "If you are feeling safe and secure because you think that these victims were somehow worse sinners than you and that's why it happened to them, forget it. Pay attention to the condition of your own soul and while there is still time repent—turn yourself and your attitudes around--because none of us knows how long we will be alive. While there is time, do something about it."

And isn't that true to our own experience? So often we are so focused on what others are doing wrong and or not doing right, what they have coming to them or not have coming to them, that we forget and neglect to do our own soul work. I

believe this has become our national obsession and disease—blaming rather than healing. And during this election year where there is plenty of conflict between parties and candidates let us not forget that “God is faithful , and that he will not let [us] be tested beyond [our] strength but...will also provide the way out so that [we] may be able to endure it.” The historical context for today’s gospel story may shed some light on this struggle. There were different and competing groups within Judaism at that time that were in angry, often bitter conflict with each other and vying for power and control. It was a struggle similar to the internal conflicts within different Christian denominations and between political parties.

The Pharisaic scholars of Judaism, centered in Jerusalem and Judea found the Galilean Jews to be lax about following the details of Jewish ritual, laws and observances. On the other hand, many of the Galilean Jews, centered in the countryside outside Jerusalem were political activists who eventually would attempt, unsuccessfully, to overthrow the Romans using military force. This struggle eventually ended in the destruction of the temple.

By adding the tragic story of the tower of Siloam falling in Jerusalem and the 18 that died, Jesus is telling the religiously elite Pharisaical party centered in Jerusalem that bad things also happen in their own backyard, not just to Galileans, people who are no more deserving of punishment than themselves. So in essence Jesus is telling members of both groups—the Galilean activists and the powerful Pharisees to drop their agendas, their finger-pointing, scapegoating and gloating and the false sense of security that comes from believing you are protected because you are in the right party. Both stories—the Galileans murdered in the Temple and the victims of the tower of Siloam falling in Jerusalem—contain a call for repentance, amendment of life, and turning to what gives life and bears good fruit.

Interestingly, I believe that the most important part of today’s gospel story is not the two tragedies and the backdrop of partisan politics but the powerful parable that Jesus uses as way to lift up a way for this followers to endure and transcend the strife. Perhaps Jesus would have done us all a great favor by starting first with the parable of the fig tree so we could see the call to repentance from the vantage point of seeing God as an avid gardener, one who faithfully cultivates the souls of individuals and nations rather than the one who gives and receives news reports. The parable of the fig tree is in line with the major trajectory of the New Testament which forcefully launches us in the direction of a God who does not bring death, but points us to new life and to a generous God who is always eager to give us

another chance to get it right and make it right if we allow him to cultivate our hearts and souls.

The wisdom contained in the parable of the fig tree is the true headline story. It helps us to see the spiritual fruit that comes from true repentance. The vineyard is frequently a metaphor for the nation of Israel and the figs or fruit is the result of godly living. God's concern is clearly not only for individuals but also for the souls of nations.

The presumed owner of the vineyard in today's story is impatient, expecting to see figs produced immediately. After all he has bills to pay and mouths to feed. In ancient Israelite culture it was expected that no figs would be harvested from a newly planted tree for three full years and on the fourth year the first harvest would be given to the glory of God. So the owner's insistence on the fig tree bearing fruit before it is mature is spiritually misdirected.

Think how often that we fall into the same trap. We come to Lent knowing that we should examine our lives, acknowledge where we are lacking, and make a commitment for personal change or positive civic engagement. We often see God plant a new thought or behavior in our mind and we immediately expect a result. And when we don't quickly see the new fruit we are tempted to give up. Often we are the impatient vineyard owner who wants to abandon something good before it has had time to take root in our souls. In this story God is the gardener who is all about giving us another chance to bear fruit as individuals and as a nation.

As a spiritual practice I invite all of us to look at our gardens at home and take note of what did not bloom or bear fruit last year and do some hands-on fertilizing and cultivation. Now is the time! Now is the time to meet the Holy Gardener. He is the one that is not eager to cut us down but would rather apply the nutrients so that we can grow into the fruit-bearing people and nation he desires. I invite us this Lent to hear with new ears Jesus' call to turn our lives around and toward that which cultivates our personal souls and the soul of our nation—until we see the blessings and new fruits of Easter appear. Amen.