

Text: Luke 13: 1-9
Title: Repentance
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About ten years ago lightening split the night sky and struck a north side building. “Sun Times” columnist Neil Steinberg wrote about it this way:

Religion doesn't play fair. Say the lightning bolt that damaged a Wicker Park building Friday had blown out the windows at a Planned Parenthood office, or set fire to a gay bathhouse, or melted the front doorknob of a dirty bookstore, wouldn't any number of ministers give in to temptation Sunday and thump their pulpits, expounding on this warning, this note of divine displeasure, a reminder that those who sin condemn themselves to the fiery pit?

Probably.

But the bolt of lightning did not hit any of those places. Rather, it blew a dozen bricks out of the tower of the First Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Thus, it is allowed to be a mere phenomenon, a meaningless natural electrical discharge.

Now tell me, is that fair?

With cynical-tongue-in-cheek Steinberg is playing with the question:

When calamity strikes is it evidence of God's judgment?

When trouble rains down is it an act of divine retribution?

That question is as old as Job and was asked twice of Jesus: Once when the disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” And again, when the crowds come to Jesus, in our text this morning....

Jesus is told about the death of some Galileans ~ who were most likely in Jerusalem during the Passover and killed by Pilate. The crowd probably expected Jesus to chime in about the injustice, raise the rebel yell of the oppressed, or maybe shed some light on the physics of a moral universe.

Because, the working premise was that whether by an act of man (Pilate) or an act of nature (the collapse of a tower) suffering was linked to sin. On the scales of a moral universe surely God would bless the good and bring bane upon the bad. Illness, poverty, disease, and death must be punishment for sins known and unknown. Falling towers, tornados through trailer parks, and lightning strikes must be evidence of divine karma. The death of the Galileans or those crushed under the tower pointed to their sinfulness. Or so went the calculation....

But then Jesus booms out:

I tell you, no! But unless you repent you too will perish.

Jesus doesn't comment on the tragedy of either situation ~ casting blame or proclaiming innocence. He doesn't defend God or damn those who died. He doesn't defend those who died or damn God. He turns the conversation on its head. Rather than wonder about retribution, Jesus weighs in about repentance.

And, don't miss the ominous tone here or the shadow in the parable Jesus tells. While he skewers the assumption that bad follows bad, he still warns that bad follows those who don't repent. All are sinners and all need to repent, or you too will perish.....

Repent or perish?

This just got a whole lot harder.

This just got a whole lot harsher.

It's easier to poke at questions with Neil Steinberg.

Repent or perish.

What then is repentance?

Elie Wiesel, in a speech remembering the holocaust, said:

We remember Auschwitz and all that it symbolizes because we believe that, in spite of the past and its horrors, the world is worthy of salvation; and salvation, like redemption, can be found only in memory.

Repentance is, at least in part, a function of memory.

Repentance requires that we remember rightly ~

who we are and where we've been,

what we've done and what we've left undone,

what's been done to us and what we've done to others.

I'm a big believer in talk therapy.

Chances are if you came to me for counsel I quickly acknowledged that I was in over my head and recommended a good therapist. I've been talking to a therapist/friend for almost 20 years. You'd think I'd be fixed by now. You'd be wrong. But it still seems like a crucial conversation.

A good deal of therapy is making sense of and accepting our stories. It is working with the meaning that we make of our memories. And, like peeling away the layers of an onion, the telling of self doesn't come quickly or easily. It takes time. Maybe that is why the gardener asked for another year?

Repentance involves remembering.

And that takes time.

Time to sit.

Time for silence.
Time to reflect.
Time to retell.
Time to recover the truth.

When I was a high school freshman, I was racing home on my bike, late and in trouble. I paid little attention to the wobble of my front wheel. I should have. While going down a hill the front wheel came off, the forks went into the ground, and the bike stopped. Bodies that are in motion tend to stay in motion, and I was launched over the handle bars. Never getting my hands up, I landed on my front teeth, and knocked out six.

That reconfiguring led to false teeth and a good deal of time looking up at the lights in a dentist's chair. At one point an infection developed in the root of what was left of one tooth. And, sparing you the details of screws and puss and antibiotic flushes, I ended up at an oral surgeon. The infection had moved into my orbital bone (face bone) and there was no other option but to grind out the infected area (literally). While I was awake.

In order for there to be healing the oral surgeon had to dig under the root. In order for there to be healing he had to get to the very core of who I am, and.....

And, it took time.
Time to sit.
Time to be silent.
Time to open up.
Time to unearth the trouble.
Time to heal.

I've been driving past a church sign that says "Lent is for filling in the potholes of life." I have no idea what that means.....

But, I do know that it takes time to dig around at the roots. It takes time to turn over the soil, and tug at the weeds, and fold in the dung of repentance. It takes time to get under the superficial. It takes time to set aside worrying about the failings of others, or the balancing of the universe, to get at the core of who we are. Barbara Brown Taylor frames it this way:

Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads... Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

I am not suggesting that there is only one way to do repentance. I think it takes all sorts of forms: prayer, therapy, conversation with friend and family, pastoral care, corporate confession, meditation, AA meetings, etc.

And I think repentance is more than just tallying up personal peccadillos. Repentance is also corporate; it is naming and turning away from injustice and idolatry and all that spoils God's will for creation and turning toward the pursuit of justice, commitment to community, and service to others.

Repentance is the long slow work of coming to grips with the truth of who we are and discarding the distortions. The gardener asked for more time for the fig tree ~ may we make use of the same.

Dear friends, this text is part of a series of stories that trace the route of Jesus toward Jerusalem. And at the end of that journey any notion that suffering and death are the lot of the guilty is turned on its head. For, the "One without sin" suffers and dies on the cross ~ only to rise from the dead in three days. And therefore, the scales of divine retribution are forever out of whack. In the words of Fred Craddock:

Jesus' disciples are forever freed from the ancient notion that prosperity and good health are evidence of divine favor, whereas poverty and suffering are clear signs of divine wrath.... Jesus rejects such attempts at calculation, not simply because they are futile, but because they direct attention from the primary issue ~ the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God without linking one's loyalty to God to life's sorrows or joys. All are to repent....

Dear friends, the good news is not that judgment will be leveled, the scales balanced, and finally all will get their due; the good news is that the calculations of retribution are eternally unbalanced. And....

where there would be judgment there is mercy,
where there would be punishment there is forgiveness,
where there would be merit there is grace,
where there would be death there is resurrection.

And yet, Jesus proclaims here that the work of repentance is essential preparation for resurrection. Rather than religious routine or pious sentiment repentance is part of how we get ready for Easter.

To follow the path of the last few weeks....

Even as those who hunger and traverse a wilderness,
we are gathered unto God as a mother hen gathers her chicks.
And under that embrace let us tell the truth of who we are.
Let us use the time we have to bring our whole selves to the hope of Easter morn.

Amen.