

Lent 03 C 2022
March 20, 2022 :: Luke 13:1-9
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“Restoration, not Retribution.”

We’ve just heard an important gospel readings , because one of the things Jesus hoped to accomplish, was to set the record straight about how God relates to human beings. He does so, here.

So, one day, some people were talking to Jesus about some Galileans who who’d been slaughtered while worshiping in the Temple, and about some other men who were killed when the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell on them. And those people who were questioning Jesus were wondering what those fellows did to deserve such a tragic end.

And while we can’t know why all those people died, we can be fairly confident in asserting that the theology embraced by those people who were talking to Jesus, was the ancient theology of retribution. It’s a theology that basically says that, if you’re a good person, God will reward you. But if you’re a bad person, well, God just might drop a tower on you. It’s a theology that St. Paul seems to embrace in our reading from 1st Corinthians. And in some quarters, it’s a theology that is still embraced today.

And so, in response to their rank speculation, Jesus first tries to appeal to their common sense:

“Guys, do you really think that all those people were worse sinners than everyone else?”

And even though it’s pretty clear that those people assumed that the answer was “Yes,” Jesus has to respond with an emphatic “No!”

“No, they were *not* worse sinners than anyone else. And, no, their horrible deaths were *not* the result of the ‘wrath of God.’”

And, as I’m reading the text, I’m thinking: “So far, so good. Well done, Jesus!” But then Jesus says something that *seems* to contradict the point he’s just made, when he says:

“But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Say what, Jesus? I mean, after refuting the theology of retribution, in one breath, are you now embracing it, in the next? What's going on here? Well, let me tell you.

Our problem stems from the Greek word that was translated into English as “perish.” It's a word that has two meanings in the Bible. In some cases, it indeed refers to something that's been *destroyed*. But in other cases — and I think that includes our gospel reading — it's referring to something that has *spoiled*. In other words, what I think Jesus was actually telling them, was something like this:

“You guys obviously still embrace a theology of retribution. But I'm here to tell you that it's a bad theology. That's not how God works! And unless you 'repent' of your belief in it, it will spoil not only your relationship with God, but it will also spoil your relationships with other people, as well.

And I'll have more to say about that in a minute.

And so, this is how Jesus is trying to challenge the theology of retribution. But he's also smart enough to know that, if you take away one theology, you've got to offer another to replace it. And so, in the second half of our gospel reading, Jesus offers them the Parable of the Fig Tree.

Through this parable, Jesus is proposing to replace the theology of retribution with the theology of *restoration*. Because it's a parable that tells us that, instead of *punishing* sinners, God would rather *restore* them to his image and likeness, and enable them to bring forth those fruits that are worthy of his people.

And the reason we know this, is because of a particular word that Jesus used in the parable. When the landowner and gardener were discussing what they should do with the unfruitful fig tree, and the landowner was wanting to cut it down, the gardener said, "Sir, *let it alone*." Now, the Greek word that was translated to be "let it alone," was *the exact same word* that Jesus said on the Cross, when he said, "Father, *forgive them*" (Luke 23:34). In other words, both the gardener in the parable, and Jesus on the cross, are appealing to God for forgiveness, not punishment. Appealing to God for another chance. And that is what restoration looks like.

Now, what Jesus is suggesting — by offering the way of forgiveness and second chances — is entirely counter-intuitive, because who hasn't heard things like the old adage, "Spare the rod and spoil the child"? And when our girls were young, Peggy and I read lots of child-rearing books that essentially said the same thing. But we also quickly came to the conclusion that, while corporal punishment might indeed teach our girls to mind us, it would also teach them to fear us. And fear is a lousy basis for a relationship. Even for a relationship with God.

(And going back to what I said earlier, this is why Jesus objected to the theology of retribution; because, more than anything else, it engendered the fear of God. The the dread of God. And you cannot have a relationship of mutual love and respect, where there is fear of one for the other.)

But there is more to this theology of restoration than forgiveness and second chances. Because, what else did the gardener propose to do? Basically, *everything he could* to help that fig tree produce fruit. He wasn't going to leave anything to chance. And Jesus is telling us that this is God's attitude towards us as well: that God not only *wants* us to be fruitful, but God will

also *help* us to be fruitful. And, what's more, this is to be our attitude towards each other. Because, in a community that operates within the framework of a theology of restoration, *we frequently need each other to be fruitful.*

So, the big questions, that our gospel reading is challenging us with, are things like:

If God can forgive us, can we find a way to forgive others?

And, if God can give us another chance, can we find a way to give others another chance?

And if God is going to do everything in his power to help us be fruitful, can we do the same for others?

Those can be some really uncomfortable questions. But they're questions we absolutely have to ask ourselves.

In the end, some people have argued that sinful behavior can produce a kind of hell on earth for the sinner. And I would tend to agree with that. But our gospel reading would also argue that, living by this theology of restoration, can produce a kind of heaven on earth for those who pursue it. Because it's our best hope for a happy, safe, fulfilling, and *fruitful* life. And isn't *that* what we all seek? I think so. So, let's get to work!

Amen.