

Trading In

Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC, Camden, March 24th, 2019

Our Gospel text addresses several difficult questions for us. Is suffering the result of so-called sin? What should our response be in the face of tragedy? When is it time to root out or cut down that which does not bear fruit? What does it take to bear fruit where there has been none? What is our role and what is God's role in all this?

In our passage from Luke, Jesus is speaking to a crowd, telling stories and answering their questions. Some folks tell Jesus that the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who was known for his ruthlessness and brutality had some Galileans murdered. Not only that but Pilate had their blood mixed with the blood of the animals they had brought for ritual sacrifice according to their law of holiness and purity. A brutal force had made a mockery of it – worse, rendered their own life blood impure by mixing it with animal blood. Jesus picks up on the story and asks: “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than other Galileans?” He also offers a second example of a tower falling down on some people in Jerusalem and asks, “...do you think that they were worse offenders than all those others living in Jerusalem?” It is striking that Jesus carefully gives examples of different ethnic and social groups. Both the Galileans from the north and the people of Judah from the south experience calamities and suffering.

If we put this in our context of just the last ten days, we might ask: “Were those who died or lost their belongings due to the flooding in Nebraska worse sinners than those others from Nebraska who survived unscathed? Were those poor people living in Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe who died as a result of the Cyclone worse sinners than others from their countries who survived? Were those Chinese who died in the chemical explosion worse sinners than other Chinese who survived? Were those attendees who died at the mass shootings in the Mosques in Christ Church, New Zealand, worse sinners than their other Muslim brothers and sisters in New Zealand?” We could easily keep this going and point to suffering everywhere on the globe. We all share in this experience and have a context to identify with it. This is a universal

phenomenon. No one is exempt or better than another. In his own day and for us, Jesus undermines any isolated finger pointing at “those” other people.

Jesus answers his own question as to who wins the sinner contest, and says: “No, I tell you; [no one was a worse sinner than another] but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

What might Jesus be up to? First of all, I hear a resounding ‘no’ to any simplistic explanation that automatically connects suffering with personal culpability. However, such was the thinking of Jesus’ time. Your illness or poverty or calamity were signs of God’s disfavor and the result of personal transgression. Such equations are too simplistic and serve to ostracize and marginalize people. Just remember how many people claimed that AIDS was a divine punishment for people of a different sexual orientation than the self-proclaimed norm.

We do sometimes suffer the consequences of our actions or those of others. A look at all the extreme weather patterns we are observing ought to wake us up to the real consequences of climate change and our role in it. When we cut corners, use shabby work materials, towers can come falling down and airplanes can fall out of the sky. When we create and tolerate inequity, we create suffering. When we take the shortcut of scapegoating certain groups or individuals as the cause for a concern, make it easy to kill and have a modern technology as a means for disseminating hatred, people get gunned down in a mosque or a high school. If we abuse our bodies, we will struggle. Patterns of self and other abuse often get handed down from generation to generation. This is true from addiction to other forms of avoiding any real engagement with our feelings, including looking for solace in material well-being or workaholism. It includes any forms of trying to buy or barter our way into a sense of love, self-esteem, belonging and security.

Jesus doesn’t approach these struggles from a retributive point of view that implies that those who struggle deserve punishment. Jesus understands that personal struggles can also relate to systemic abuses of power. Jesus would soon experience first-hand the cold hand of terror and the abuse of power as it was exercised by bullies like Pilate and collaborators in the priestly elite who had a stake in keeping the populace under their control. Ask people who have been

tortured in prisons in Syria. Ask survivors of sexual abuse. Ask victims of racial profiling and police abuse of power.

Jesus also wants to be wary of our pointing of fingers at others and our tendency to separate ourselves from their suffering to protect ourselves. As long as we can label others as more deficient or culpable, we don't have to take such a hard, long look at ourselves and the ways in which our own behaviors and attitudes contribute to the wounding of ourselves, others, and the wider world. In essence, I think Jesus is saying, "Instead of analyzing other people from a safe distance, figuring out how to fix them, or just using their struggle to up your own self-esteem by way of comparison, learn compassion and take a look at your own life. Take time to see and feel how you need to turn your life around to live wholesomely in relationship with others.

Turning around is at the heart of the word "repent." It is very moving to see what New Zealand is doing to deal with the tragedy of the shooting. A friend of mine in Auckland has been attending sessions at the local Mosque. People are weeping together, learning about each other, forming bonds. Gun laws are being changed. People are taking time to process and see what needs turning around – an ongoing challenge.

I would also like to share an example from our Lenten Series about how a group of well educated, privileged upper middle-class white women started to see their own experience and that of struggling neighbors from a new perspective. These Christian women had started a "Mother's Touch" Group in their church with the intention of praying for their children in high school. They were living in an upper middle-class neighborhood which bordered on a poor, mostly Hispanic neighborhood, right next to them. The high school consisted of half white and half Hispanic students. This group of mothers had tried to reach out to Hispanic women to invite them into their group but no one had joined them. In response, they asked sociologist and theologian Dr. Christena Cleveland for help in understanding what was getting in the way.

Cleveland asked them, "What time does your group meet?" The mothers explained that they met on Thursday mornings at 11:00 a.m. When Cleveland asked what made it possible for them

to meet at this hour, the women reflected on how their love for their children had driven their decision to be stay at home moms. Cleveland posed the following challenge: “Take your families and go to a church in the Hispanic neighborhood. Learn who they are. Worship with them, eat with them, find out what matters to them, what they struggle with and talk to me in six months.”

Ten of the women took up the challenge and their lives were transformed. After six months of worshipping and working with their Hispanic neighbors, one of the more affluent mothers said: “This is the first time in my life that I feel like I have flesh on my bones. How did I live and worship before?” Something had dramatically shifted. They acknowledged that the Hispanic women loved their children just the same but that many had to work three jobs to make ends meet. Many did not have private transportation and the neighborhood was less safe, making it more challenging to be out and about. As a result, the Mother’s Touch group had shifted their meetings to later in an evening and provided child care. They provided transportation and when it became clear that more women would come if there was a translator, someone volunteered to pay for that help. Now, these women work together to advocate for immigration reform and other matters of inequality.

I think this story also reflects the spirit of our second part of the Lukan reading. We have a landowner who takes a rather superficial look at why a particular tree is not bearing fruit and just wants it cut down. It is the gardener who intervenes and has probably done so year after year. “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.” The gardener really knows the tree and will not give up on it.

By connecting this parable with the story about the mothers, I am **not** suggesting that it was simply a matter of some women with privilege investing their resources (potential manure) to help the less fortunate bear fruit. I think we can easily avoid looking at systemic inequality by approaching life this way. The wealthier women did use their resources wisely but their own lives needed the stinky manure of understanding what makes life so hard for someone else.

They were willing to learn how to see the world from someone else's perspective and to start asking hard questions about inequality and the need for solidarity. Their own lives were enriched by compassion and by the passion, values and commitments of others. Together, they were able to bear greater fruit as they allowed the Holy Spirit to do her work in and through them.

All of us need the help of a gardener to put some good manure down and have patience with us. We are all planted in the soil of life. Perhaps we have a hard time strengthening our roots because we feel overwhelmed by transitions and losses in our lives. Maybe we feel depleted from working too hard, taking care of others. Maybe we have been barking up the wrong tree about what will bring us joy in life. God, the master gardener will not give up on us but will add needed manure, aerate our soil, and compel us to prune away what is sapping too much of our energy.

As Isaiah suggests in his prophetic witness, God is just waiting for us to come and ask for what we need. There is no price on what God is willing to give to us. Love, mercy and belonging are always available free of charge if we learn where to look instead of putting our energy and resources into that which does not truly satisfy. Bobby Joe Valentine has a wonderful song about such letting go into God and trading what does not matter for that which truly sustains us, entitled "Trading In." Let us hear listen and be inspired to trust that we are already home with God, anywhere we go, if we only wake up to the connection. All praise and thanks be to God.

Trading In – Bobby Jo Valentine

I'm trading deadlines for a softer ceiling
I'm trading lonely for a truer feeling
I'm trading easy for a harder healing
But one that leaves me whole

I'm trading running for a hand beside me
Trading my shadows for a light that won't hide me
Traded my money for a love it won't buy me
And a little less control

And we pick up so much when we're living that we should never hold
We carry so much we should never own

But all that I need is what I've been given
Right inside this skin
Everything else that doesn't treat me well
I'm trading in, I'm trading in

I'm trading safety the world has sold me
For something wilder and real and holy
For what the ghost of my father told me
That you're already home
Anywhere you go

And we pick up so much while we're living that we should never own
We carry so much that we shouldn't hold

But all that I need I've already been given
Right inside this skin
Everything else that doesn't treat me well
I'm trading in, I'm trading in

I'm trading deadlines for a softer ceiling
I'm trading lonely for a truer feeling
I'm trading easy for a harder healing...
...But one that leaves me whole.