

Lent 3C New Song

Whenever I read today's Gospel, I remember a day right after the awful earthquake in Haiti a number of years ago which left so much devastation. Susanne and I were having lunch in a little sports bar in Davenport when I happened to overhear a couple of young men at the bar, talking about it as the news continued to come in over CNN.

One of them said, "Well, they actually deserve what they get, you know. All that AIDS down there and all..." His friend just nodded...in mute agreement, I guess. Not being sure I could trust myself with a response to such heartlessness, I just paid our bill in a hurry and shot them a withering glance on the way out. I probably should have done more.

I suppose not many people would be so blatant about saying something like that. Although a well-known so-called evangelist in this country famously said that God sent Hurricane Katrina to destroy much of New Orleans because of their many sins! But there are a surprising number of people out there who really do think God punishes us like that -- and that people who are suffering are really "getting what they deserve" in some way. They may even think that about themselves when they suffer!

I guess these folks have never read the New Testament. Or at least the passage we had today from Luke's Gospel. Apparently Jesus had just learned of one of the many atrocities committed by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. Often, Jesus' fellow countrymen from the north in Galilee would come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the Temple. Some of them may have been making noises about the overthrow of the Roman occupation at the same time, and the historian Josephus tells us that Pilate regularly executed such rebellious Jews for that kind of talk -- inside or outside the Temple!

And that must have happened to these Galileans. There had also been a recent industrial accident just southeast of Jerusalem where a tower under construction had fallen and killed eighteen people. Jesus decides to use these "current events" as "teachable moments." So he says, "Do you think those Galileans or those eighteen who died were any worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem at the time? "NO, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they

did.” Some scholars believe that the repentance Jesus was calling for here was for some in Israel to “repent” of their desire for a violent overthrow of the Romans, an undertaking Jesus was sure would be a disaster and a wholesale slaughter of Jews. Many would “perish” if they did not repent of this foolish desire.

In this passage, Jesus is doing at least two things: First of all, he’s renouncing what was popular theology in those days, the doctrine of “retribution.” It basically said that, since God was in charge of everything and was a just God, then those who receive special punishment, or suffer tragedy, must be guilty of some great sin. Pretty much what those guys in the bar were saying after the earthquake in Haiti.

Jesus says that is simply not so. We don’t know why good people suffer sometimes, and Jesus doesn’t attempt a kind of global, simplistic explanation for that kind of thing. Sometimes good people, like those Galileans, suffer at the hands of bad people! They are innocent victims of human sin – like Jesus himself would finally prove to be; like those 49 devout Muslims praying in their mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, dying at the hands of a white supremacist. As tragic as those things are, we have free will, and some people abuse that free will and use it to hurt others.

Other people, like those eighteen on whom the tower fell, suffer because of accidents or disease. This is not a perfect Creation! It’s a good Creation, but not perfect. There is room in this Universe for accidents because not everything in life is “pre-programmed” or scripted. And we haven’t yet discovered cures for all the cancers and other diseases to which the human body is susceptible.

There are also so-called “natural disasters” like Katrina or the earthquake in Haiti or Hurricane Sandy. These can be especially difficult to understand. Sometimes they may be the result of our monkeying around with the environment and throwing things out of whack. Sometimes, they are just part of the cycles of nature or the ongoing formation of the earth and its surface.

Tragically, sometimes people have chosen, or HAVE, to live in the path of these seismic events and that results in another kind of “accident,” of being “at the wrong place at the wrong time.” And, of course, there ARE cases of terrible things happening because of the consequences of our own actions, even our own brokenness – like someone dying of a drug overdose or being killed in a car crash

while speeding. No less tragic, but at least these occurrences are somewhat understandable.

What Jesus is saying (and this is his second point today) is that we need to be very careful about making judgments in these cases about other people. All of us are flawed, and the fact that we may survive while another dies should be no source of comfort...but rather a call to humility.

And please let us agree to stop using the phrase "There but for the grace of God, go!" I hate that! What are we saying about the **lack** of God's grace for the other guy? What Jesus is saying is that life is as tenuous and fragile for us as it was for those Galilean pilgrims or those eighteen accident victims. Their deaths came unexpectedly...and ours may as well. We need to be in a constant state of self-examination and faithfulness so we will be ready whenever and wherever our time comes!

This is part of what the season of Lent reminds us of – that we're all in this together. None of us is perfect. All of us stand in need of God. As the old saying has it: "the ground is level at the foot of the Cross." That's why the prayer we offer to bless the ashes on Ash Wednesday reads like this: "Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth: Grant that these ashes may be to us a sign of our mortality and penitence, that we may remember that it is only by your gracious gift that we are given everlasting life..."

God is gracious, dear friends. Not angry or vengeful or punishing. Our task is to know that is true, to be eternally grateful for that fact, and to live our lives in humble and thankful response to that good and gracious God. Let's not judge other people. We can leave that to God.

Let's just be grateful that God doesn't judge us like those two guys in the bar were judging the people of Haiti.

Because if God did...none of us would make it! Would we?