

Luke 13:1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

⁸“ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ”

Dear Friends in Christ,

WHAT REALLY MATTERS?

or

SIDETRACKED BY THE “RELEVANT”

What do you say this week I talk about something more “practical,” more “relevant” than usual. Let’s take one of the big issues of today and talk about it: let’s say, the war in the Ukraine. There’s plenty to talk about there: an unprovoked attack, manifest brutality, innocent blood shed, thousands killed, millions of survivors who have the more difficult lot—of living through a war. Wouldn’t that be a more practical thing to address today?

After all, we talk about, hear about, God and sin and heaven and Jesus and all that stuff every Sunday. Week after week. Like many churches, we have this three-year schedule of readings. There are about 500 different readings. At the end of three years, we go back and do it all over again: 500 readings. Of course, on the third Sunday in Lent in 2022, today, the sermon is on Luke, and the next time these lessons come round, should the Lord let this world and us survive, maybe the sermon will be on Exodus, so there’s a little variety—but the same three lessons.

For those who tire of all the theology in church, this week we have a refreshing change. Someone finally speaks up and gives Jesus’ ministry a “practical” twist, a “relevant” turn. “Jesus, you heard about what happened up in Jerusalem last Thursday, right? Pilate’s soldiers ordered the temple guards to stand down. They marched right into our holy place of worship, and wetted their swords with Jewish blood. What do you think, Jesus?”

They probably wanted Jesus to talk about the hated Roman conquerors, decade by

decade consolidating their grip on Jewish life. Then there is the outrage of the shedding of blood just in front of the temple itself! Or maybe Jesus would take the side of those who held that these Galileans had brought it upon themselves. Had they been members of some anti-imperialist group? We really don't know; that's all conjecture. Others were curious if Jesus would agree with the general public opinion that for these Galileans to die like that in a place like that means they must have had it coming. Not that people liked Pilate or the Romans, but these sorts of events have the smell of sulfur and divine judgment about them. (That opinion still lurks in the shadows in our day: a bad end means they must have led bad lives.)

Like the comments section of a well-read article, surely there were many takes on what had happened up in Jerusalem. "Well, Jesus, what do you think? What's your take?"

Here's Jesus' take: ***"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."***

Pretty rough, isn't it? Share a tragedy with a man and he says, ***"Unless you repent, you too will perish."*** I think we walk away at that point, right?

If you were one of Jesus' disciples and you heard Jesus' answer, maybe you would think to yourself, "Jesus, calm down, take a breath! Do you always have to make it about God and faith and heaven and hell?" Well, yes, he does have to make it about God and faith and heaven and hell because that's what matters. That's the point of his answer. The worst stuff that can happen in this world will be the best you can hope for if you don't repent.

Now just to review, the Bible definition of repent means to admit that we are sinners, that we feel guilt and sorrow over those sins, and that we only look to and trust God's undeserved mercy—specifically Jesus our Savior.

Elsewhere the Bible summarizes it with this brainteaser, *"To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure."* (Titus 1:15) If you're not right with God, nothing is right, no matter what you think to the contrary.

At this point I want to make one thing clear. This is not to suggest that the only thing Christians can ever occupy their minds with is religious subjects. Nor is this to say that world events shouldn't be mentioned in sermons or Bible classes—though generally Bible classes are better places to do so. In truth, we have to interface with the world. How else can we be salt and light in the world unless we know something about the world we live in? And what better way is there to show concern for our fellow people than in a language they can understand: by addressing their worldly concerns in some manner.

Yet whenever a current event came up in Jesus' life, Jesus always took it and made it about people's relationships to their God. Always—in different ways, but always.

Not long after Jesus' birth, all the little boys in the town where he was born were murdered, every single one Herod's soldiers could lay their hands on. Oh, the sorrow! How many people would harbor life-long resentment for that? Yet when others in uniforms

nailed him to a cross, Jesus prayed, *“Father, forgive them.”* He made those hammer blows about them and God and forgiveness.

In a Gospel reading a couple weeks ago, Jesus was informed that that same Herod’s son was trying to kill him. Jesus’ reply was simply, “Go tell him that his plans don’t matter. I am going to go do what I came to do.” No tirade, no speech, just focusing on his own saving work.

Another subject of the day: *“Should we pay taxes to Caesar?”* Again, Jesus made it about God and people. “Give to God,” and also, “And God wants you to give to Caesar.”

And so when Pilate ordered a bloodbath in the Jerusalem temple, when the tower of Siloam (that’s a neighborhood of Jerusalem) fell and killed eighteen people, Jesus told his listeners that those calamities should make them think. They shouldn’t think about pointing fingers at other people, not Pilate, not the tower builders, not the Galileans, not the innocent bystanders. It isn’t about imagining that someone had it coming. Those were classic first century Jewish attitudes. And it isn’t about our typical 21st century attitudes either. What’s our society’s attitude? Twenty-first century America, I think, sees it in an almost opposite way. I think our world tends to see calamities as nothing more than random events. Instead of God working judgment in every misfortune (untrue, Jesus said), our culture tends to see *nothing* about God in these incidents (untrue again, Jesus says.) What Jesus tells us is that whether these things are a judgment or not is not for us to determine. But there is something about God that we should take away from every fatal car accident, every untimely Covid death, every bombing of a civilian target, every tornado fatality. Instead of fixating on judgment or innocence, or whether it’s all just a bunch of random events that don’t matter, Jesus tells us what it means for us:

“A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ”

Each person in this world is such a fig tree. Each of us has a given time to come to know our God and Savior. It’s not a time we know, but God knows how long we have and he will not cut that time short. In fact, God is very generous with our time allotment, whether through the prayers of our loved ones or the intercession of Christ himself, he may even choose to be extra gracious. God is patient with our unfruitfulness when we stubbornly go our way. God generously feeds us with what we need to come to repentance. The Holy Spirit puts the Gospel of Jesus Christ in front of our eyes and in our ears. Yet alongside God’s longsuffering patience is his justice. His justice is not because he is vengeful but because we are sinful and stubborn. For the one who refuses God’s care, there will be judgment. It is not judgment from an arbitrary God.

For all who have repented, however, there is another role that we are privileged to play in Jesus’ parable. We are privileged to play the role of the vine-dresser. That vine dresser loves his plants like the dog and cat and horse lovers out there love their animals. This

vine-dresser, a person, becomes the servant of the tree. He pleads for the fig tree, saddened at the thought of it being cut down. He adds care of this fig tree to all the other duties he has of tending the vineyard. He will wake up early some mornings, earlier than usual to care for this unfruitful tree. At the end of a long day, his aching back will add another ten minutes of digging. He becomes a servant to the tree.

This privilege is likewise ours. To plead to God in our prayers for his patience with those who have not yet repented, who do not yet call on Jesus as their Hope, their Life, their Righteousness. Ours is the privilege to let people know about one who came to save us, or if not to share the message, then to support those who share that message.

In the end none of us can make anyone believe, but then we can simply have the clear conscience of the vinedresser, "By God's grace, I have done what I can."

What really matters? It comes to the fore when tragedy strikes, when we are left wondering, "Why? How?" And God would have us remember that it is a reminder that now is the time for us to repent because he wants us with him in heaven forever. Now is the time, not only for us, but for all who yet have the breath of life. Amen.