

March 7, 2010: SACRIFICING DEAD ENDS

Luke 13:1-9, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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When Audrey learned I was going to preach from the lectionary texts for today, she stopped short of actually saying, “Better you than me!” These may be difficult texts, but I’m no hero to use them; my motives were selfish. This Lent I’ve been worrying at a theological knot: “What does the death of Jesus on the cross *mean*?” Rather than lose my thread, I decided to include you in part of the journey. Why does Jesus have to *die* and what does that mean to us? Today’s texts help us address the part of the knot that wonders what Jesus’ death means when bad things happen to good people. Westminster has experienced its own “bad thing” this week—the sudden and tragic death of Dan Graham. When that kind of senseless thing happens, I’m convinced that, unless we engage with God in the terrible questions of “Where *are* you when life falls apart?” we’re stuck with a God who looks like the Divine Trickster, in which case, faith is no more meaningful than a regular Sunday morning appointment.

It’s hard to know why those folks hustled over to Jesus with the news of the desecrated sacrifice and innocent deaths. Jesus was talking about the urgency of the times. Maybe they wanted to urge him to run for king. Or maybe they just wanted his take on a senseless act of violence so they could make sense of it themselves. The theology of the time figured, “You get what you deserve.” The apostle Paul suggests we *don’t* get what we deserve, but he makes it sound ominous.

Paul is writing to a congregation whose public persona is, “Our faith is prettier than yours,” which hides holier-than-thou religious practices, incest, and double standards based on classism. Not a pretty sight. Today’s text starts with Paul sweetly asserting he doesn’t want them to be “unaware.” Unaware of what? They’ve been coasting on their sacramental theology, and Paul has had it. Just because they’ve been baptized and eaten the Lord’s Supper does not mean they can do whatever they want the rest of the week. Far from thumping their noggins, Paul sounds downright pastoral, acknowledging that Corinth is the kind of place where you’re gonna be tempted to go back to your old, bad ways. “But God will give you a way out,” he says. “You can do better than that.” And why is that? *Because*. “Because you’re not in this alone. Because even in temptations and tragedies, because God’s choice is always for redemption.” God’s going to work.

The problem is that Jesus keeps repeating “repent or else.” He makes it sound like repentance is an insurance policy to keep bad things from happening. If only I’m repentant *enough* nothing bad will happen. He pulls the plug on that one with the parable of the fig tree. We could read this like an allegory—God is the owner, we’re the tree, Jesus is the gardener. But Luke claims it’s a *parable*, and we’re supposed to walk around in it a little more than that. Some scholars wonder whether, in the nature of a parable, Jesus might not be suggesting he’s the manure. Jesus as the dead, decomposing element that gives one last hope for fruit—a

parable about redemption, linked with the talk of senseless tragedy. Jesus just about hits us on the head inviting us to call on God in faith, to trust in the person of God, not what God can do for us.

Maybe this is the owner's concern for fruit—our allowing God to use *us* for redemption. Maybe, but I think we need to first define “redemption.” Richard Rohr says redemption is “God expanding our freedom to love.”¹ What if *our* faith—*our* redemption, the fruit we bear—what if *that* is how God heals, changes, transforms events and people and the world we live in. As a Franciscan priest, Rohr's operating premise is that *we are* channels of God in the world. Don't we sing a song about, “Make me a channel of your peace . . .”? As if to say, when *we* are the channels of God's love, *our suffering* is what lets God in. You might have heard that tribal rug weavers around the world insert an intentional flaw into their rugs. For Navajo weavers, the flaw is not to avoid tempting the fates with our perfection. Navajo weavers believe that the very flaw itself is where God enters the world. Our faith, especially in tragedy, allows God to continue the work of redemption. Tragedy becomes that cracked spot in the otherwise perfect façade of our lives, a small dereliction. “It's by your faith, by your perspective, your trust and hope and prayer, that you bring good out of evil. . . God only gets in through the cracks. . . the cracks in our hearts . . . the wounded and broken ones who long for God” (Rohr). For Luke, those senseless tragedies are interpreted with the parable of the fig tree given another chance to bear fruit, one more chance to receive (and to pass on!) redemption. God didn't push over the tower of Siloam; it fell because of building failure. But unless we “repent” and our faith allows God to work even in tragedy—which is the meaning of repent, to allow God to work—that event will remain only a tragedy.

Senseless tragedy seems epidemic these days, shaking the very foundations of the earth. One of my friends was in Haiti on January 12 when the earthquake hit. Jonathan was there with his cousin (Ben) and Ben's wife (Renee) on a mission trip as part of their final year of seminary training. By sheer miracle, Jonathan and Renee were able to crawl out of the rubble of the collapsed orphanage where they were staying, but Ben was killed. Jonathan tells of spending that first night in shock, huddled in an empty lot, with 300 patients who had been evacuated from the nearby hospital that had crumbled. What got them through that night of aftershock and the cries of the wounded and dying, was the singing of a Creole woman until dawn. She was singing hymns—beautiful, beautiful praises of God. Renee still asks “why.” Why she and Jonathon lived and were uninjured, why Ben died, why a people who suffer so much already had to experience this. Her answer is, “Trust in God's promises, even in this.” She says that the outreach of the body of Christ, from people they had never even dreamed, the outpouring of life and transformation *because of Ben's death* is what helps her to trust God's promises, even now. For Jonathan, the experience has changed his sense of call. Rather than parish ministry, he now believes he is called to international mission work. His call has changed because of the strength of the bereft and broken Haitian people who carried them, the ones who had come to serve, carried by

¹ Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*

the people who had so little. Because of the Haitians' trust in God's promises, the missionaries carried in the time of their deepest darkness.

Bad things happen to good people. That is the nature of being human, of living in this world. Bad things happen. But the fruit of redemption allows God to use even those tragedies for life and redemption, to expand our freedom to love. It is, after all, what Jesus did.

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