
Give the Fig Tree a Second Chance

A sermon by Canon Todd Smelser

Lent 3 – Year C

Why do bad things happen to good people? And conversely, why do good things happen to seemingly bad people?

Today's Gospel reading, here in the middle of Lent, recounts the story of the untimely deaths of several Galileans and Judeans followed by the parable of the fruitless fig tree. It begins a section in Luke's Gospel about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem that focuses on repentance. The slaughter of the Galileans appears only in Luke, and we can assume their deaths occurred in Jerusalem, since they were killed as they were offering sacrifice. These deaths were ordered by Pontius Pilate, who would later oversee the crucifixion of Jesus. The question of the people was "were these Galileans worse sinners than those who were spared?" And Jesus gives the answer: no. Or when the tower of Siloam fell and 18 people were killed, crushed because they stood in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Is that because they were sinners?" And Jesus says, "No." Another time some ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither," says Jesus, and he cures the man of his blindness. Jesus denies a correlation between the man's problem and someone's sin.

Yet, it's a persistent question. Many of us do harbor the notion that somehow people do get in life what they deserve, and there must be a connection between the sorts of people they are and the good or bad things that come their way in life. Who hasn't heard someone say, "I wonder what he did to deserve that?"

But for Jesus, that's just not the way things work. Sometimes we do suffer as a direct result of some wrong we have done, some bad decision, and we suffer the consequences. Mistreat your body, and you may get hurt. Mistreat a friend, and you can permanently damage a friendship. But sometimes situations are not black or white, but varying shades of gray. And the idea that only good things happen to good people should have been put to rest when Jesus was nailed to the cross.

Christian faith is not ultimately an insurance policy or magic protection against tragedy. We followers of Jesus are not immune to life's seemingly random circumstances. When a driver ran a red light and clipped the front of my car, I was thankfully not hurt, only shaken. More disturbing for me was this person's total void of any responsibility or blame—not even I'm sorry came from his lips.

In his book *The City of God*, St. Augustine considered the great suffering that occurred when the barbarians sacked Rome, and he noted that when the barbarians raped and pillaged, Christians suffered just as much as non-Christians. Faith in Christ did not make them immune to pain and suffering. Augustine wrote, "Christians differ from Pagans, not in the ills which befall them, but in what they do with the ills that befall them." Faith does not give us a way around the cross, but a way through the cross.

Lent is not a season in which we are to judge the words and actions of our neighbors, as easy as they might be, but rather to focus on our own relationship with God and that neighbor. Jesus invites us not to spend too much time looking at someone else, but rather looking at ourselves. He refuses to get caught up in the question of whether or not someone deserves what they get in life. The question is rather what in my life needs changing. What do I need to repent of before I can move on. What do I need forgiveness for, and what do I need to turn over to God.

At the heart of the Christian faith is the belief that God does love us, warts and all. None of us deserve God's unconditional love, but we all receive it as a gift. I don't think God carries around a ledger sheet on each of us, but God does offer each of

us acceptance and forgiveness and love.

Life is too short to spend lots of time asking the wrong questions. Rather, let's spend time asking the right questions about God and ourselves, and our responsibility as stewards of God's creation. When people asked Jesus questions he often responded not with an answer, but with a story. Like he did in the last of our Gospel reading.

A man planted a fig tree. The fig tree used up lots of nutrients but did not produce any figs. "Why should I let this do-nothing fig tree use up good soil?" he asked the man. "Cut it down." But the gardener replies, "Let it be for one more year. I will do everything I can for it. If it bears fruit, great! If not, cut it down." Does the fig tree deserve a second chance? That's really not the question. Rather this little parable is just a story about a fig tree and an extravagant gardener who just couldn't give up on his tree, or maybe it's a story about us, and God's generous opportunity to bring about new and resurrected life to us.

I love the phrase: please be patient with me; God isn't finished with me yet. Isn't it time in our public discourse to stop the blaming, the scapegoating, and realize that God's isn't really finished with any of us yet. We live in a day, not so unlike that of the atrocity-rumoring Galileans—when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Amid the noise and bluster Jesus says, "Hold on. Think about a homely fig tree. One that has not borne much fruit for a long time. The farm owner wants to cut it down. But his head gardener, a patient person who sees the big picture and asks the right questions says to him, "First let me aerate the soil and throw some manure on it. Let's give it a second chance. After that, if it does not produce fruit, we can chop it down." The question for us in this Lenten season is "Are we like that fig tree? Are we bearing fruit that will last? Are we part of the problem or part of the solution? This Lent may we all be more like the generous gardener. Let's give ourselves and one another a second chance.