

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, March 11, 2007

Sermon Text: Luke 13:1-9

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I'll start off with a story that I thought made the point and was somewhat humorous, but sort of skewered everyone's ox. I'm not sure that it worked this morning at 8:28. I hope it works better here. Rudy, you'll be a witness for both. You let me know.

A horrible thing happened. A man fell into a pit, and couldn't get out. A subjective person came along and said, "I feel for you down there." An objective person came along, and said, "Well, it's logical that someone should fall in that pit." A Christian Scientist came along, and said, "You only think that you are in a pit." The Pharisee said, "Only bad people fall into pits." A mathematician calculated the odds of falling into the pit. A Fundamentalist said, "You deserve that pit." A Calvinist said, "Aren't you glad that's over with?" A Wesleyan said, "Even saved people occasionally fall into pits." A realist said, "Now, that's a pit!" A geologist said, "While in the pit, notice the beautiful rock strata." An IRS agent asked him if he was paying taxes on the pit. A Democrat said, "We'll create a program to prevent this." A Republican said, "Pull yourself up and out by your own boot straps." A county inspector asked him if he had a permit for the pit. A self-pitying person said, "That's nothing. You should see my pit." An optimist said, "Things could be worse." A pessimist said, "Things will get worse." Then, there's Jesus. Jesus, seeing the man in the pit, reaches down and takes him by the hand, and brings him up and out of the pit.

Now, you've heard the Luke reading just now, and Pontius Pilate had some people from Galilee killed as they were worshiping. Just as they were offering their sacrifice, their own blood was spilled on the altar as they died. Around the same time, a tower of Salaam collapsed and killed 18 people. They asked Jesus, "Jesus, were these people more sinful than others? Jesus, were these people deserving of the tragedy they experienced? Jesus, did your Father single them out for punishment? Surely, they were somehow to blame." Jesus said no. Jesus said no.

Sometimes we over think things. We over think a thing, and then we miss the obvious point. The Gospel reading today illustrates Jesus not allowing the crowd to reframe the argument as why does God allow bad things to happen, or more precisely, not allowing the crowd to reframe the argument as 'is tragedy evidence of God's punishment.' That is theologizing, and that's what the crowd was starting from, but Jesus took them to another place. You may not see it at first, but when you or when anyone says yes, those worshipers getting killed or that tower falling down or that hurricane hitting New Orleans must be because they were sinners. You may not see it at first, but the mere presumption of that statement or question is that you, standing there presuming, alive and unhurt, and couldn't be anywhere near as bad a sinner as the victims, who were punished, you think by God through tyrants or accidents or storm. That attitude is the very pillar of the place that you put yourself upon when you make a statement like that. It assumes that, #1, God

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immediately and violently punishes sinners, and #2, you are safely above it all because you have not suffered tragedy so you must not be that kind of sinner.

Rather than over think and theologize and allow the people to think themselves holier than victims, Jesus calls them up and out of the pit, pit of sin, with a call to repentance, and that is the point of the passage. Were those murdered or those who died in the tower or those who die in storms worse sinners? Jesus clearly says no. God does not work that way. Bad stuff is not a punishment for sin, but don't you be caught off guard. Bad stuff does happen to everyone, and everyone is going to die. Don't get caught without time to turn to God.

Repentance is an urgent issue not because it will prevent death. Nothing will prevent death. Repentance means turning toward God, and is important and always a concern because you never know when you're going to run out of time.

There's a story of a famous rabbi, who was walking with his disciples when one of the students asked, "Rabbi, when should a man repent?" The rabbi calmly replied, "You should be sure to repent on the very last day of your life." They thought about it, and they said, "But Rabbi, we can never be sure when the very last day of our life will be?" The rabbi smiled and said, "The answer to that problem is very simple. Repent now."

Repent now. In our reading, Jesus continues to underline His point by telling a story to say how it is that God does work. God does not violently, immediately punish sinners. God, our God, revealed in the heart of Jesus Christ, the God, who through Jesus, said, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." God gives sinners second chances, and that includes nurturing and nourishing and helping us by the Holy Spirit grow and produce good spiritual fruit. In short, God does not desire to cut you off before your time, but instead to nourish and strengthen you so you will produce fruit. You may say what fruit? I hate it when preachers talk about fruit. What are they talking about? Well, let me tell you. The specific traits, the spiritual fruit, mentioned in Galatians, Chapter 5, the fruit of the spirit, the fruit that we are to produce, love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control.

Ah, but isn't it so much more fun and more pleasant to think that God punishes bad people, and I have not yet been severely punished so I have not been all that bad. Jesus is saying no, that is not the way to think. All have sinned, and you could be better. Turn back to God and bear fruit. People's lives are short and sometimes end unexpectedly. Turn back now! We do want to blame each other for problems, and blame people for our own suffering, and sometimes even blame God. We are in a world where selfishness and sin reign, and no one is superior. No one has a place to stand and look down and judge why tragedy has befallen another.

As those of you who are old enough to remember, Pogo years ago in the Sunday comics, he said, "We have met the enemy and he is us!" We blame others. We blame God. We

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stand above and theorize whom we can blame next to keep the problem outside ourselves. This is not new. This is not new.

When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the forbidden tree, Adam blamed God. You gave me this woman, and besides, I really was born yesterday. Eve blamed the snake. The snake didn't have a leg to stand on! I use that whenever I have an opportunity. I like it.

I know this story hits a little close to home. Blame, we want to push it away from ourselves. Blame, we don't want to accept it. While walking with his son on the beach, a father asked his three-year-old son, “Tim, where do you think all this sand came from?” The little boy had heard this sort of question before. He said, “I don't know, Dad. Don't blame me!”

My son used to watch the cartoon, “The Simpsons.” When he was about the same age as the character, Bart, when he was caught doing something, he would quote Bart Simpson's litany of denial. It goes like this. I didn't do it. Nobody saw me do it. You can't prove anything. Oddly, now that was just a joke. He used to say it real fast. I didn't do it. Nobody saw me do it. You can't prove anything. Oddly, I have heard pretty much that same litany of denial come through many public figures over the years. I didn't do it. Nobody saw me do it. You can't prove anything.

Sin is a pit. We stand above no one. Our own self-worship and arrogance and judgment of others is no one's problem but our own. It is a problem that Jesus would have us free of if we only turn back to God in humility and be willing to have God grow in us a new heart and good fruit of the spirit.

It may mean something quite different than you think, the word “repentance.” I keep saying repentance. It might not be what you think it is. Too many people believe that repentance means saying I'm sorry to God. It does not mean saying I'm sorry to God. Sorry doesn't make it better. Sorry doesn't fix our tendency to do it again and again. Sorry doesn't undo what we have done. What we need to do, and repent does mean this, is have a complete turn around, a complete turn around. Instead of following our own desires at every turn, thinking ourselves lord at every decision, and wrangling the truth until it serves our will, repent means to turn our lives around and start back home into God's embrace. Repent means to turn our lives around from serving us and our will and return to God's embrace where we seek God's will for our lives and for others and seek the spiritual muscle and courage to live it.

A repented life is a life no longer turned in upon itself. It is a life sick of serving one fleeting desire after another and finally deciding that maybe God after all does know best on boundaries and on how to treat others and on how to use money and how to use power and what the world ought to look like and us in it. There is something wrong with the world and everyone in it. Do you doubt that?

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We all feel a sense of ought, that it ought to be better than this, that we ought to be better than this. (Loud noise occurs) If anyone was sleeping, they're awake now. That we ought to be better than this, happier than this, more connected than this. Jesus storms past the questions of blame, of why bad things happen, and He said He focuses on the fact that quite a lot of bad things happen all around, and sometimes it's an accident and sometimes it's political intrigue, and sometimes it's storm or war, and sometimes we just can't find the blame, but we do try.

A wise writer once wrote, “We don't have to fix the problem if we can fix the blame.” But we do! Jesus wouldn't buy into that. Good, bad, indifferent, we all wander off. We all hurt ourselves and others around us by seeing only ourselves. We have all gone astray from the ways of God, the love of God, the connection to God that we were made for and often don't have.

The solution is not to find blame. The solution is to repent, to turn around in the true sense of the word. To turn away from self and back to God who made us, who loves us, and wants us to be happy and in love with others. The Book of Ezekiel says that God desires the death of no man, but wants all to turn and live, wants all to turn and live.

You know, I mentioned the Garden of Eden story earlier. Some people have trouble with the Eden story, and they can't really see it as meaningful in today's world, but let me say, brother and sister, and I say this truly, you don't have to believe this story literally because you've lived this story in your life. You have known what was forbidden, and you have known that it would bring harm, and you have done it anyway. You may deny the literalness of the story, but you can't deny that you've lived it out in your own life.

Yet, even though we have intentionally disobeyed God to our own hurt, God is patient with us, and that's the way the Scripture in this section for today ends. If God sent tragedy to wipe out every sinner on the face of the earth, who would be left? I wouldn't. If God sent tragedy to hurt or kill sinners immediately, would you make the cut? Are you sin-free or is God giving you another year and another year and another year of nurture to see if perhaps you'll bear fruit as He has desired?

There may be times when by any logical measure, God should give up on us, but God doesn't deal with logic. There is another chance. The tree gets another year to bear fruit. God gives us another opportunity to repent. Repent means, remember, change and turn away from selfish, sinful habits and grow closer to the image of Jesus Christ. So God is patient and merciful, but there is still the fact that time is fleeting. Jesus is our Lord. Jesus is our Messiah, our God come to us to lead us home. Repentance is not a grudging duty, but a joyful return into the very arms of God, the arms of God where we have always belonged. The arms of God where we have always belonged. Amen.