

When Bad Things Happen...

A reflection on consequences vs. Divine punishment.

Luke 13:1-9
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
March 7, 2010

This past week I, and a couple of congregation members, attended the quarterly Delegate Assembly of **Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry** (TMM), a long-time promoter of religious tolerance and religious freedom in the Tulsa area. As an Interfaith ministry, over the years they have sought to:

- foster dialogue that nurtures respect, trust, and cooperation in relationships;
- advocate for racial justice and the fair and equal treatment of all persons;
- give a voice to those who are being forgotten by our society; and
- develop direct service programs for those who have an unfulfilled, compelling need.

College Hill has rightfully been quite supportive of this organization for many, many years. But as is somewhat typical of many non-profit organizations that have been around for quite some time, they are navigating through a time of evaluation and re-formation in order to adjust to daunting changes in church and society over the decades.

During that gathering they presented a draft of their new **Mission Statement**, "Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry, in response to our common calling to love our neighbor, will develop cooperation among the various faiths to meet the pressing needs of our community." And they have come up with a new tag-line: **We need not believe alike to love alike.**

I couldn't agree more with that statement, and I heartily plan to offer continued support of their work for equality, justice, understanding and inclusion. However, the day after that TMM gathering I found myself having to deal with something that has caused me much internal struggle ever since I started to embrace progressive theological thought.

While I truly endorse the right for people of faith to believe whatever it is they want to believe, what do we do then, with what many of us consider to be "bad theology?" In other words, is there a danger in becoming too inclusive and accepting of *whatever* anyone wants to believe about the nature and character of God?

I continue to believe that over the centuries, and certainly in our own day and time, **there have been and still are often harmful and damaging consequences (especially emotionally and spiritually, and sometimes even physically) inherent in certain theological beliefs.**

I could go on now and present a list of what I would categorize simply as "bad theology." **But perhaps one of those at the forefront of damaging theology (and I've learned this through personal experience) is the attempt to interpret human suffering as God's punishment for our sinfulness.**

I'm not saying that there aren't consequences to our sinfulness, some of which may indeed lead to great suffering and even tragedy. Rather, I'm saying that **I no longer believe that suffering and tragic circumstances in our lives should be tied directly to God's punishment for our sins.**

Now, I am fully aware that this flies in the face of how many Old Testament authors interpreted suffering. For there is no doubt that they often report Israel's tragic misfortunes as God's punishment for not following the laws and ways of Yahweh. This particular connection between sin and suffering is still very much alive.

For example, I read a shocking story this week about a mother who blamed herself for her small daughter's brain tumor because she believed that God was punishing her for her inability to stop smoking. A hospital chaplain quoted the mother as saying, "It's my punishment for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick. Now I'm supposed to stop, but I can't stop. I'm going to kill my own child!"

Upon hearing this, the chaplain decided to forego the standard practice of reflective listening and concentrated on remedial theology instead. The chaplain responded, "I don't believe in a God like that. The God I know wouldn't do something like that." But this messed with the mother's worldview and theological perspective. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or arbitrary one. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to be the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe.

Perhaps you have heard stories somewhat similar to this one, concocted in order to explain personal tragedy. I have many times. In fact, I used to be one of those who came up with stories like that to try to explain the suffering in my own life. But even though I no longer believe that suffering is the result of God's punishment for our waywardness, perhaps like myself, you still have a little voice inside your head that starts wondering what is was you did wrong after being faced with a tragedy of some kind, or even an illness.

Have not many of us gone on to scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs, our sinfulness. And while that may be an informative and helpful reflective exercise, **have not many of us still gone on to infer that our suffering is caused or allowed by God in order to teach us something?** For yes, it is oddly comforting to believe that suffering is the result of sin, because it eliminates randomness and helps provide an explanation for why we suffer.

We can expand this line of thinking from personal suffering to corporate tragedies, like terrorist attacks, or even natural disasters like devastating hurricanes and tornadoes, and the unfathomable damage to life and property caused by earthquakes and tsunamis. **Whenever there are meteorological or geological events – and sometimes political events – that cause horrendous devastation, you will find those who try to tie them to divine retribution for our sinfulness.**

Again, this was common practice in Old Testament times. But is there a different understanding that we can glean from the New Testament? Today's biblical text from Luke 13 helps counter this notion that suffering is inseparably linked to sin. Luke gives us a pair of stories that call us to repentance (vv. 1-5) and a parable that illustrates the patience and love of God (vv. 6-9).

In the first story, Luke writes that Jesus recounts an event where some Galileans came to make their sacrifices in the temple, but are instead slaughtered by Pilate's

soldiers, profaning the altar with human blood. The implication in Luke's story is that perhaps those who died *deserved* what they got. Jesus, however, denies that their suffering occurred because they were worse sinners than other people who were not killed.

Instead of answering the question, Why were they killed? Jesus calls his listeners to repent lest they suffer the consequence of their sins. His purpose is not to condemn or punish, but to redeem. Again, **while not all tragedy is the result of sin, sin can indeed lead to tragedy – but as a consequence of that sin, not because of divine punishment.**

Jesus' listeners, and Luke's readers, have sinned (as we all have), so Jesus calls them to repent – to turn away from those things that may lead to suffering, harm or disaster.

In the second account, we learn that eighteen people had been killed when the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell on them. Like the story of the Galileans slaughtered by Pilate, this story of victims of a natural calamity led folks to ask, Why did this bad thing happen to these particular people? Did God target these eighteen because of their sins? Was it an accident or Divine retribution? Or as we might phrase it today, "Was this tragedy an intentional "act of God?" This continues to be a common question especially in the face of nature's fury.

Jesus again answers, No. And again he uses the opportunity to call his listeners to repentance. **Repentance**, a major theme during the season of Lent, is a major theme in the Gospel of Luke. And as I have mentioned on previous occasions, repentance from a biblical perspective, doesn't mean just feeling really, really sorry for the wrong things we've done. While that's a good start, **the repentance that Jesus calls us to means to turn back – to turn away from the sinful, damaging and hurtful direction we're heading, and turn back to the ways of God**, to the ways of love and compassion, the ways of peace and justice.

In connecting this teaching of the importance of repentance with the two stories of sudden death – whether by murder or accident – Luke wants to warn us that **our repentance can't be delayed. Repentance, therefore, needs to be an ongoing, daily attitude and approach toward life**, rather than just an occasional act.

This warning to repent is then followed by a parable of a barren fig tree. A fig tree has failed to bear fruit, and the land owner responds by saying that it should be cut down since it takes up ground that might be used more productively. But the gardener makes an alternative proposal, asking for one more year in which to personally nurture the tree so that it might bear fruit. He pleads: Give the fig tree another chance!

We learn what many of us have experienced on a deeply personal level: God always give us another chance!

And like the gardener, who commits himself to the nurture of the fig tree, **let us nurture each other; let us also give each other additional chances**, since there is always the *possibility* of future fruitfulness.

As we recognize our need to repent and bear fruit, let us move away from linking and interpreting our suffering as God's punishment for our sinfulness. For let's face it, tragedies occur, whether intentionally by oppressive governments, or accidentally by imperfections in the kind of world we live in, or simply by natural processes. In neither case must we conclude that tragedies are an indication of divine judgment and punishment against the sinner.

Rather, in view of the uncertainty of life and the unpredictability of the future, we must continue to examine our own life – and repent. **For the door of God's love and mercy is always open. The possibility of change is still available.**

Will the fig tree of our lives be fruitful? God waits and longs for that to happen.

Amen.

Resources:

Barbara Brown Taylor, "Life-Giving Fear", *Christian Century*, March 4, 1998.

Jirair Tashjian, *The Christian Resource Institute*, 2004.