

Lent: Suffering, Sin, and Bad Theology

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

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February 28, 2016

I had a particularly interesting day-off this past Friday. I woke up at 5:00 am, arrived at East Side Christian Church by 6:15 am, boarded their church van for a road trip with several others, including that congregation's pastor, the Rev. Fred Turner, their outreach coordinator, Evan Taylor, and the Rev. Chris Moore, pastor of Fellowship Congregational Church, who along with the Tulsa Interfaith Alliance helped organized this adventure.

We arrived at the State Capital in Oklahoma City just before 8:00 am. Gathering with 120 others from different parts of the state, we participated in an interfaith activity of support at the 2nd Annual **Muslim Day at the Capital** – a day filled with workshops, lunch on the 4th floor rotunda, keynotes in the House chamber, and a closing interfaith service of prayer, led by a rabbi, a reverend, and an Imam.

Our mission was one of welcome and of providing a peaceful presence. We formed a long double sided corridor of solidarity as the Muslim participants (around 200) made their way from the parking lot into the Capital building. Our efforts helped shield them from the remarkably offensive signs and verbal taunts from about a dozen protestors.

One protestor wore a shirt with the words, "Allah is Satan," and held up a large sign on a post that read, "Every Real Muslim is a Jihadist!" Another sign read, "The Cult of Islam encourages killing Christians." Another declared of Muslims, "Today's Supporters; Tomorrow's Executioners." One protestor held a Bible and not only screamed threats of going to hell to the Muslims but also to those of us who dared to call ourselves Christians for supporting them.

Our instructions were very clear: Do not engage with the protestors in any way shape or form. So instead, we called out our greetings of welcome to the participants to drown out the opposition. I must admit I had to laugh, however, when one protestor, standing behind our line of solidarity, shouted out as one of our own came down the line offering us Krispy Kreme donuts, "Donuts for the Hell-bound." Ah, that made them even more tasty. Another protestor brought a megaphone with lettering on one side that stated, "Turn or Burn," and on the other side, "REPENT."

Interestingly, I turned to a colleague and honestly noted, "Now there's nothing wrong with the biblical message to repent." After all, as my sermon title two weeks ago indicated, **Lent is indeed a season to reclaim an understanding that we all are on a journey of repentance.** That message was clearly the centerpiece of John the Baptist's ministry as well as one of the messages preached by Jesus, including in today's Gospel reading from Luke 13, which we will look at in a moment.

Biblical repentance, as we explored on the First Sunday of Lent, is not about simple remorse or doing penance in some sort of self-punishing or self-denying way. Rather, to repent means to be transformed – a metamorphosis, if you will – in heart, mind and spirit by turning away from those things opposed to the ways of God. And as

Christians, we find additional understanding of that in what Jesus taught and modeled. In a nutshell, **to repent primarily means to turn to attitudes and ways of living that exhibit the love of God, love of neighbor as yourself, and even love of one's enemies.**

Based on this, it is my own opinion that those protestors who condemn all Muslims and the Islamic faith itself are the ones who need to repent; to turn away from their attitudes and ways that do not reflect the loving ways of the Jesus they profess to follow. The saddest part of this is that their hateful rhetoric isn't necessarily done out of an attitude of actual hatred (this is where I differ from some of my other progressive colleagues), but rather acting out of fear, misunderstanding, stereotyping, scapegoating, and especially ignorance.

I would add that **their words and actions come, in part, as an outpouring of the theology they have been taught and/or have chosen to believe.** And while I truly endorse the right for people of faith to believe what they choose to believe, I also think there is a preponderance of **bad theology** out there influencing far too many Christians. For there has been, and still are, harmful and damaging consequences (especially emotionally and spiritually, and sometimes even physically) inherent in certain theological beliefs. This is especially true in the fundamentalism found in any faith tradition.

This morning, I want to propose that many of us are also still influenced by some bad theology. One particularly bad theology, which admittedly is represented in the Bible itself, especially in the Old Testament, **connects human suffering with Divine punishment for our sinfulness.** Now, 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 I no longer believe the suffering and tragic circumstances in our lives should be tied directly to God's punishment for our sins. And yes, I am fully aware that this flies in the face of how many Old Testament authors interpreted suffering, whose recorded words are now called the 'Word of God,' which is interpreted by many as 'words directly from God.' That is not the progressive Christianity understanding and approach to the Bible.

There is no doubt that these authors often report Israel's tragic misfortunes as God's punishment for not following the laws and ways of Yahweh. That's why a connection between sin and suffering is still very much alive today.

For example, there's a shocking and true story 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 or have been a part of stories somewhat similar to this one, rationalized in order to explain personal tragedy. I used to. **Even though many of us no longer believe that our suffering is the direct result of God's punishment for our**

waywardness, perhaps like myself, you may still have a little voice inside your head that starts wondering what it was you did wrong when faced with suffering, a tragedy, or even an illness. And whenever there are natural meteorological or geological events, like tornados and earthquakes, and sometimes political events like wars, you will find those who try to tie them to divine retribution for our sinfulness.

As a corrective to this bad theology that says suffering is inseparably linked to sin, Jesus provides a different perspective, one very different from those Old Testament authors. 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 in Jerusalem, but are instead slaughtered by Pontius 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, that it was God's will that they be murdered. 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. His purpose is not to condemn or punish, but to redeem.

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, implying that there really is no such thing as an accident? Jesus again answers, No. And again he uses the opportunity to call his listeners to repentance. Jesus' message 'repent or parish has been tragically misunderstood by those who have turned it into 'turn or burn.' There's an entire sermon in that statement.

Rather, it serves as a warning that **our repentance, our transformation, must not be delayed,** for we do not know what the future holds. But it's all for living life in the here and now, not as some promise or threat about the hereafter. **We must continually work to turn away from that which is harmful and destructive, and turn toward the ways of love, peace, justice, forgiveness and compassion. This is how, by God's grace, we experience transformation.**

Given their particular theological perspective of the nature and character of God, **I suspect those those protesters in front of the State Capital actually believe that they themselves would be punished by God if they *didn't* demonstrate their opposition to those who believe differently from themselves. That's the epitome of religion gone awry, of bad theology causing suffering for others. It's a theological understanding in need of repentance.**

Yet, in view of the uncertainty of life and the unpredictability of the future, we are called to an ongoing journey of repentance and transformation; to **examine our own life and see if we harbor any harmful, hurtful and bad theology.** Knowing that, the possibility of transformation is always available.

Amen.