



**“Lessons from the Garden Club”**

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Luke 14:1-9 (NRSV)***

Today’s gospel lesson cuts to the heart of the perennial human problem of suffering with Jesus’ commentary on two catastrophic events in Luke 14. One event is the martyrdom of some Galileans caused by Pilate and the other is a natural disaster, the collapse of a tower, most likely caused by an earthquake. The description of those who are affected by these tragedies shows that Jesus is addressing the general topic of violence and suffering that strikes without reason or meaning.<sup>1</sup>

“Why this suffering?” is the nagging question. “Did the victims do something wrong? Did they deserve to perish? Or is there another explanation?”

Furthermore, “What does the future hold in store for me?” Luke’s audience wonders. “What’s next? Should I expect these kinds of things to happen to me, to us? Or is there some way to protect or insure that I, that we, will not fall victim to similar circumstances?”

The way that the author of Luke-Acts tells the story, Jesus’ answer to the question, “Should we blame the victims?” is a resounding, “No.” And his answer to the question, “What’s going to happen to us?” is “It depends.”

The words that Luke-Acts uses are these: “No, [we should not blame the victims, but] I tell you; ...unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Then Jesus tells the parable of the fig tree:

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’

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<sup>1</sup> Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, & Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1994), 152.

What does Jesus' response to these tragedies mean, contextually and theologically, and what does it suggest for our time?

## II

Contextually speaking and theologically speaking, Jesus' response to the problem of suffering was a direct challenge to the dominant views of suffering in his time, which was to blame victims for their plight.

Many of you have heard me talk about the problem of evil before, and heard me explain that Jesus' preaching and teaching was reflective of the Jewish prophetic and wisdom traditions, which were almost antithetical to the legalistic analysis of his day.

The prevailing legalistic views of Jesus' time saw a cause and effect relationship between suffering and evil. If someone suffered, s/he must have deserved that suffering. Social scientists today refer to this approach as "blaming the victim" for their circumstances. Pat Robertson's claim that the Haitian earthquake was the consequences of Haitian voodoo practices is an example of a blame-the-victim claim in our time.

To apply Jesus' logic here means that we denounce Pat Robertson's claim and that we acknowledge that the Haitian people have suffered far more—through this earthquake and its aftermath—because of Papa Doc and Baby Doc's bankrupting the nation for thirty years.

Repentance on anyone's part would not have averted this earthquake, but better national leadership might have provided a healthier economic infrastructure, stronger buildings, and more organized governance for responding to the aftermath of the earthquake.

Jesus, along with the prophets and wisdom school of thought, by contrast to the legalist views, took a more sympathetic approach to victims, saying essentially, "Stuff happens." Sometimes stuff happens as a result of bad behavior, or from a failure to take a more appropriate action, like a corrupt government, and sometimes stuff happens that is beyond our control—maybe beyond anyone's control—like earthquakes and other natural disasters.

So, unlike the leading thinkers of his day, Jesus argued that not every bad thing that happens in the world has a cause and effect relationship, but *sometimes* there is a cause and effect relationship between actions or inactions and results—and we are able to make choices about how we will respond to events or how we will act in the future.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus uses the concept of "repentance" to describe the actions that could be taken after an event, in this case—the response to a tragedy.

The biblical word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means “turning around.” *Metanoia* in the Greek literally means a life-changing insight that comes from seeing things from a different, broader, more integrated and higher level perspective. It is that light-bulb moment, that epiphany that changes our understanding of everything else. Repentance, *metanoia*, turning, changing, etc., in the aftermath of a tragedy results from insight, empathy, and a desire for better outcomes in the future.

Sometimes *metanoia* occurs in an immediate about-face. But more often than not *metanoia* is a slower, more deliberate process—a kind of turning or even returning process, like the behavior that we observe in the Prodigal Son. So, when stuff happens, we can examine whether we continue as before or whether some other action is required from us.

For example, we may not be able to stop some bad things from happening to us or to others in the world, but we can control how we respond to difficult circumstances. We could not stop the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile from happening, but we can control how we respond to these circumstances. We can fill our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering boxes with contributions to fund international relief for victims of natural disasters. We can pray for the victims of these earthquakes and for the people who are being sent to provide direct aid to them. We can learn more about the socio-political-economic reasons that some people are more vulnerable to these disasters and more challenged to recover, and seek through advocacy to influence changes in foreign policy, and more. These are a few examples of how we can respond to suffering on a global level, even when we cannot prevent it from happening. In these situations, our repentance can mean redoubling our commitment to demonstrate our solidarity to people in the midst of hardship and struggle.

### III

On a more personal level, when bad stuff happens to us, we may have more options of how we respond. We can allow this stuff to keep us from being the fruitful people God intended us to be, or we can learn from and grow from these experiences. “How can we learn and grow from difficult experiences?”

My answer to this question is this: “it’s not easy.” And I’m not making light of tragic circumstances or anyone’s suffering. I like to call ‘em like I see ‘em. Let’s face it, some of the stuff that happens to people, to us, reminds me of manure. There is nothing attractive about manure. Believe me, as farm kid, I’ve seen and smelled and shoveled a lot of it! Manure is manure. You can’t make it pretty. But manure can be useful.

You can shovel manure into a spreader, or drain it into a “honey wagon” and broadcast it over the soil where plants are grown, and trust that in God’s good time and with a few decent rains, life takes root, plants grow, flowers bloom, fruit emerges, and crops are harvested.

Theologian Yoshi Rodriguez offered an excellent example of *metanoia*, returning to God's hope, Friday evening, when we met to prepare for worship today. I like to think of Yoshi's example as "The Parable of the Orange Tree."

Yoshi explained to me that his dad is a serious gardener. He said, "My dad plants anything that looks pretty to him, which is about everything that he sees." A couple of years ago, Yoshi explained, the two of them planted an orange tree in their backyard. They have been watering it ever since, and hoping for oranges. But so far, the tree hasn't borne any fruit. This has been a great frustration to Rueben, given that he likes oranges and has such a green thumb.

Not too long ago this father-son duo was discussing what to do with this unproductive orange tree. Yoshi explained that his dad was leaning toward cutting it down, digging out the roots, and planting something new in its place. But Yoshi recommended a different approach. He suggested that they should try some fertilizer, keep watering it, and give the tree another year. So they are. And no doubt, God is being glorified through this fertilizing, waiting, and watching period!

The effect of *metanoia* in Jesus' day and in our time looks more like the wisdom that the Tokada-Rodriguez family is employing. The world of a master gardener is very different than the world of a magician. The gardener sees a fruitless tree for what it is, but rather than cutting it down, she or he digs carefully and skillfully around the roots and spreads manure, continues to water, and continues to hope for fruit.

If ultimately the tree does not bear fruit, then more drastic changes may be in order, but for the short term, rather than a slash-and-burn approach, a master gardener proceeds with skill and patience and knows that time is a tool that is in the hands of someone bigger than you and me.

When we encounter suffering—particularly when we experience suffering ourselves—and when we feel stuck in those fruitless moments of our lives, it is crucial that we get to the root of the cause. It is also crucial that we be clear about our own power and capacity in these situations. We can allow ourselves or others to be the victims of senseless evil, or we can do some things that create a better environment for growth and productivity in the future. We can use the bad stuff that happens to us as fertilizer that ensures a more abundant harvest in the future.

Consider what's going on in your life right now. What stuff are you dealing with right now? Are you suffering? Is someone near and dear to you suffering? Are there aspects of your life that feel fruitless?

As you focus on the challenges that you and others dear to you are dealing with right now, remember Jesus' teaching: you are not a helpless victim. You are not in this struggle alone. Barrenness is not your end. A fruitful season is in your future. Even now, as that manure is being broadcast over the soil of your life, God is present, working with you to tend and turn that soil and using this time to heal and help bring about new

growth—the fruits of which may be unseen at this time, but that are no less sure to be born. Thanks be to God. Amen.