

## “Restoration, not Retribution.”

**W**hy? That’s the question some people in our Gospel reading were wondering about as they talked to Jesus. Why was that group of Galileans killed while worshiping in the Temple? And, why did the tower of Siloam fall on those eighteen men, killing them? Was God simply punishing them for their sins? That seems to be the prevailing opinion.

However, while we can’t know why all those people died, what we can know is that the framework for their conclusions was very likely the ancient theology of retribution: which basically says that, if you commit a sin, if you do something bad, God is going to do something bad to you. In some quarters, it’s a theology that is still embraced today.

Well, since Jesus had somehow been pulled into their conversation, he decided to respond by appealing to their common sense:

“Guys, do you really think that those people were worse sinners than everyone else?”

And even though it was probably a rhetorical question, it’s pretty clear they thought the answer was “Yes.” And that’s why Jesus has to respond with an emphatic “No.”

“No, they were not worse sinners than anyone else. And, no, their horrible deaths were not the result of the ‘wrath of God.’”

And, as I’m reading the text, I’m thinking: “So far, so good. Well done, Jesus!” But then Jesus says something that seems to contradict the point he’s just made, when he says: “But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Say what? After refuting the theology of retribution in one breath, did he then embrace it in the next? What’s going on? Well, the problem is with the Greek word which got translated into English as “perish.” Let me explain.

You see, that particular Greek word— *apollymi* (ἀπ ὀλλυμι)— is a word that has two common meanings in the Bible. In the overwhelming majority of cases it has the meaning of something that is being *destroyed*. However, in a small minority of cases— and I do think today’s Gospel reading is one of those cases— it has the meaning that something has *spoiled*. In other words, what Jesus was actually telling them was something like this:

“You guys obviously still embrace a theology of retribution, but I’m here to tell you that it’s a bad theology. And unless you repent of your belief in it, it will spoil not only your spiritual life, but many of your relationships as well.”

A great example of what I’m talking about— at least in terms of spoiled relationships— is found in the first verse and chorus of the song “Pray for You” by Jaron Lowenstein, which goes like this:

I haven’t been to church  
since I don’t remember when  
Things were goin’ great  
'til they fell apart again  
So I listened to the preacher  
as he told me what to do  
He said you can’t go hatin’ others  
who have done wrong to you  
Sometimes we get angry,  
but we must not condemn  
Let the good Lord do His job  
and you just pray for them.

I pray your brakes go out runnin’ down a hill  
I pray a flowerpot falls from a window sill  
and knocks you in the head like I’d like to  
I pray your birthday comes and nobody calls  
I pray you’re flyin’ high when your engine stalls  
I pray all your dreams never come true  
Just know wherever you are honey,  
I pray for you.

That is a great description of a spoiled relationship.

So, in the first half of our gospel reading, Jesus is clearly challenging the prevailing theology of retribution. However, he's also smart enough to know that if you take away one theological world view, you've got to offer another to replace it. So, in the second half of our gospel reading, Jesus tells them a parable:

“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?’ [The gardener] 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.’”

With this parable, Jesus is proposing is to replace the theology of retribution with a theology of restoration. And what Jesus is saying through this parable, is that, instead of punishing us, God would rather *restore* us into his image and likeness, and thereby *enable* us to bring forth those fruits worthy of his people.

Now, what Jesus seems to be suggesting is entirely counter-intuitive, because who hasn't heard the old adage, “Spare the rod and spoil the child”? And when our girls were young, Peggy and I read lots of child-rearing manuals that essentially said the same thing. However, we quickly came to the conclusion that, while corporal punishment might indeed teach our girls to mind us, it would also teach them to fear us. And fear is a lousy basis for a relationship. And God knows that!

The point I think Jesus was making with this parable, is that God does not operate from a framework of retribution, but rather from a framework of restoration.

And I know that's the case because of a particular word that Jesus used in his parable of the fig tree. When the landowner and gardener discussed what should happen to the unfruitful fig tree, and the gardener said, “Sir, let it alone,” the Greek word translated as “let it alone” is *aphiēmi* (ἀφίημι), which happens to be the very same word that Jesus uttered on the cross, when he said “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). In other words, both the gardener in the parable, and Jesus on the cross, are appealing to God for forgiveness, for another chance.

So, the big question is this: If God can forgive us, can we forgive each other? If God can give us another chance, can we give each other another chance?

But wait, there is more to this theology of restoration than simply giving someone another chance. What else did the gardener in the parable propose to do? He was going to work especially hard with that fig tree. He was going to do everything he could to help that fig tree produce fruit. In other words, the gardener wasn't going to leave anything to chance. And this, Jesus is telling us, is God's attitude towards us: God leaves nothing to chance.

And, what's more, this is to be our attitude towards each other. Why else would Jesus have said: "Love your enemies." And how do you do that? By doing "good to those who hate you," and by blessing "those who curse you," and by praying "for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27ff). That's restoration theology at work.

Jesus doesn't tell us to avoid conflict, or to stay away from people who offend us, but rather— like the gardener in the parable— to do whatever it takes to make them fruitful. And that's because, in a community that operates within a theology of restoration *we frequently need each other to be fruitful*.

That's why restoration is so important. It's when we're divided that we're at our weakest. It's when we're separated by hurt feelings or anger, or by differing theological opinions or political affiliations, that we're in *no position* to nurture the fruits that God wants to see in us.

In her book *The Dream of God*, Verna Dozier writes: "That restoration ... is always the mission of the people of God. Any talk about ministry that does not talk about [restoration] has already missed the mark" (Page 113).

Some people have argued that sin can produce a kind of hell on earth. I would likewise argue that living by this theology of restoration can produce a kind of heaven on earth, because it's our best hope for a happy, safe, fulfilling, and fruitful life.

Certainly, it's easy to give up on people who offend us— to "unfriend" them or block them. And it's much harder to work with those people, and to seek to restore the relationship. But the path of restoration is the path down which God in Christ walked; and he beckons us to walk down it as well. Because God knows, sometimes even more than we know, that what we seek is a place to call home,

and a community that will welcome us. We seek, in other words, restoration—  
and not just with God, but also with each other.

Amen.