

Lent 03 C 2019
March 24, 2019 :: Luke 13:1-9
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“Restoration, not Retribution.”

One of the things that Jesus hoped to accomplish through his ministry, was to set the record straight about how God relates to human beings.

So, one day, when some people were talking to Jesus — talking about a group of Galileans who were slaughtered while worshiping in the Temple, and talking about another group of men who were killed when the Tower of Siloam in Jerusalem fell on them — the prevailing question was, “I wonder what they did do to deserve such a tragic and sudden end?”

And while we can't know why all those people died, we can be pretty confident that the people who talking to Jesus were operating within the framework of the ancient theology of retribution. It's a theology basically says that, if you're a good person, God will reward you. But if you're a bad person, God just might drop a tower on you. In some quarters, it's a theology that is still embraced today.

And so, in response, Jesus first tries to appeal to their common sense:

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

And even though it’s pretty clear they thought the answer was “Yes,” 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, Jesus? I mean, after refuting the theology of retribution in one breath, are you now embracing it in the next? What’s going on? Let me explain it to you.

Our problem stems from the Greek word that was translated into English as “perish.” It’s a word that has two meanings in the Bible. In some cases, it refers to something that’s been *destroyed*. But in other cases — which includes our gospel reading — it’s referring to something that has *spoiled*. In other words, what I think 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. That’s not how God works! And unless you repent of your belief in it, it will spoil not only your relationship with God, but also your relationships with other people, as well.

I’ll say more about that in a minute.

And so, this is how Jesus is trying to challenge the theology of retribution. But he’s 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 the Parable of the Fig Tree. And through that parable, Jesus is proposing to replace the theology of retribution with a theology of *restoration*, by telling us that, instead of punishing sinners, God would rather restore them to his image and likeness, enabling them to bring forth those fruits that are worthy of his people.

And the reason we know this, is because of a particular word that Jesus used in his parable. When the landowner and gardener were talking about what they should do with the unfruitful fig tree, and the landowner was wanting to cut it down, the gardener said, “Sir, let it alone.” Now, that’s important because the Greek word that was translated into English as “let it alone,” was the exact 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, not punishment. For another chance.

Now, what Jesus is 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 books that essentially said the same thing. But 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. Even for a relationship with God.

But there is more to this theology of restoration than forgiveness and second chances. Because, what else did the gardener propose to do? Basically, everything he could to help that fig tree produce fruit. He wasn't going to leave anything to chance. And Jesus is telling us that this is God's attitude towards us: that God not only *wants* us to be fruitful, but God will also *help* us to be fruitful. And, what's more, this is to be our attitude towards each other. Because, in a community that operates within the framework of a theology of restoration, *we frequently need each other to be fruitful.*

So, the big question is this: If God can forgive us, can we find a way to forgive each other? And, if God can give us another chance, can we find a way to give others another chance? And if God is going to do everything in his power to help us be fruitful, can we do the same for each other?

Some people have argued that sinful behavior can produce a kind of hell on earth for the sinner. I would tend to agree with

that. But our gospel reading would also argue that, living by this theology of restoration, can produce a kind of heaven on earth for those who pursue it. Because, in the end, it's our best hope for a happy, safe, fulfilling, and fruitful life. And isn't that what we all seek? I think so.

Amen.