

Margin of Metanoia Redux

March 16, 2024

The Set Up

Since today's Gospel passage is one that is clear as mud, it makes sense that I would unpack it a little first, before we hear it. It consists of two seemingly distinct passages. In the first, a crowd asks Jesus to comment on current affairs. In particular, they tell Jesus of the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices. There is no clear historical record of exactly what event the crowd was talking about. But even without an exact historical event for us to point to today, Luke paints a vivid picture.

- First: Pilate. Not only does Pilate represent Rome and remind us that Jesus and his contemporaries are living under Roman occupation, Pilate has a reputation for being violent and cruel. "Pilate epitomizes the fear-inducing brutality that Roman provincial subjects, like Jesus, experienced daily directly or indirectly." (Jeremy Williams)
- Second: Galileans. Jesus was a Galilean. The executions Pilate ordered impacted people from Jesus' hometown. He may have known them, and if he didn't know them, he could still picture who they were. He knew people who were affected.
- Third: Blood and sacrifices. In First Century Palestine, Jewish sacrificial practices were elaborate, controlled, and understood to be absolutely sacred. To hear that, after Pilate has these Galileans executed, he then mixes their blood with that of their sacrifices, is sociopathic. Not only is Pilate demonstrating his cruelty, he adds insult to injury and shows that he has no regard for their lives, their faith, their culture. Nothing, nothing is sacred. Jesus' response is to ask whether the crowd thinks that these Galileans are worse sinners than all the rest.

Now, remember, in Jesus' time, there was a strong spirituality that suggested that any catastrophe or tragedy that befell you was your fault. Think of the man born blind. Jesus answers his own question, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

He goes on to ask the same question in regard to some people who were crushed when a tower collapsed. One group of people were executed by state brutality and their legacies tainted even further, the other group found their tragic end in a surprising disaster. Again, Jesus says that the horrors that they experienced were not their fault. Then, in what seems like an error in editing, Jesus launches into a parable about a fig tree. With all of this background, I think we're ready to hear the passage.

The Scripture — Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

Then he told this parable: “A landowner had a fig tree planted in a vineyard, came looking for fruit on it and found none. The landowner 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.’”

What does this mean? Jesus is clear, Pilate and Rome’s actions are not God’s justice. The horrors they wrecked could not be attributed to God, could not be seen as barometers of people’s righteousness. What’s more, Jesus seems to be saying that even when we can’t point to a “bad actor,” to someone who is to blame for tragedy, it still doesn’t mean that the results are their fault.

Lest we imagine that these are quaint beliefs held by a simple community 2,000 years ago, let me tell you they still worm their way into our consciences. I can’t tell you how often I have people tell me, whether logically or illogically, that they feel to blame for their illness or medical condition. Perhaps my most extreme example is that of a secretary I once had who was as straight laced as they come. She was a picture of health, exercising daily, eating only healthy, organic food. She was convinced that the reason she got leukemia was God punishing her because she once smoked half of a cigarette in college.

Again, Jesus is clear. There are things that are going to happen to us in our lives that aren’t our fault. My junior year in college I had the top bunk, and so I decided I was going to tack poems to my ceiling to memorize. One was “Advice to Beginners” by Ellen Kort. It includes the line, “Everything that happens will happen, and none of us will be safe from it.” Everything that happens will happen. There are things in this life, this world, that are beyond our control, beyond our control and not our fault.

For some, the sermon can end here. Jesus has given you enough to noodle on and process and absorb. If we’re working with the theme of margins for Lent, this would be the margin of affording oneself grace. So often, we get so caught up in wanting logic and reason and justice that we forget mercy and healing and grace. For some of you, the margin Jesus is affording you in this passage is a margin of self-compassion.

There’s more. Along with telling the crowd not to beat themselves up trying to place blame on things they can’t control, Jesus is also telling them to change the things they can. Pilate desecrating the people and the sacrifice is beyond your control, but you can still do your own self work.

It's like the advice I often give when someone comes to me in the midst of a breakup. I tell them to do their work. Get therapy. Process their behaviors. Figure out why they've been behaving the way they have been. Work on being better. Do your work. Then I say, "If, at some point, the two of you end up back together, you're healthier, more grounded, more stable. AND, if the two of you don't end up back together...you're healthier, more grounded, more stable."

The word translated here as "repent" is once again a ham-handed rendering of the word "metanoia." Remember last week and on Ash Wednesday I talked about metanoia meaning to profoundly change one's mind or outlook or understanding of something. So, once again, Lent is inviting us into creating a margin for a new way of understanding, to make space for God and God's ways in our attitudes and ways of being. THIS is how the parable of the fig tree following the first passage makes sense. Like the examples Jesus gives, the tragedies in our lives are often not signs of our moral depravity. Rather, Jesus is saying, in the midst of so much that you can't control, change what you can: your mind.

Conclusion

Friends, there's a lot of ugliness out there right now. It's ugly, and for many, it's paralyzing. It can be tempting to allow crisis, adversity, even evil, to shut us down, to stop us in our tracks. And the constant blame game is really just another form of stopping us, because it's a hamster wheel, we're exerting energy, but we're not getting anywhere.

The margin that our Gospel is drawing us toward is a margin of personal transformation and healing. It's interesting, in the parable of the fig tree, the gardener advocates for digging around the tree and fertilizing it, giving it the care and attention and resources that could allow it to thrive and bear fruit. Perhaps this is the margin Jesus is calling you to cultivate this week, this season, this year. Perhaps the message of today's Gospel for some of us is to actually invest in making the changes that would allow us to bear fruit.

This is not to say that we can abdicate our responsibility to be about socio-political change. We have responsibilities to one another and to our society, and if you're looking for a sermon on that, make sure you come back next week because where the Holy Spirit is leading my sermon prep for next Sunday promises to be a barn burner. But, as we hear so often, both can be true. We can be called to tend to our personal metanoia, our personal transformation, even as the world is in need of transformation. Indeed, I suspect Jesus would concur with me that one hinges on the other.

Jeremy Williams, who teaches New Testament at Brite Divinity School, puts it this way:

Jesus' message is clear: do not be like the fruitless tree. Rather than focus on the gravity of others' transgressions, make sure you are producing good. Instead of assigning causality to others' misfortune, ensure that you are not ignoring your own missing fruit. Jesus' words suggest that tending to one's own life and positively changing one's own mind is the best strategy to prevent, or even persevere through, unexpected calamity. If one refuses to do that type of work, they are already ruined.

I'll close out with a quote from that brilliant 21st century theologian, Steven Colbert, who said:

In my experience, you will truly serve only what you love because service is love made visible. If you love your friends you will serve your friends. If you love community you will serve your community. If you love money you will serve your money. And if you love only yourself you will serve only yourself and you will have only yourself. So instead, try to love others and serve others, and hopefully join up with those who will love and serve along the way.

May it be so. Amen!

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Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9
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