

March 20, 2022
Third Lent

Luke 13:1-9

“Destroying Ourselves”

I was sorry the day I learned the phrase, *“Self-defeating pattern of behavior.”* Like unto it was the Pogo comic strip my father loved which said, *“We have met the enemy and he is us.”* My dad enjoyed it because he thought it was true. I didn’t like it *for fear* it might be accurate. In our passage **today Jesus takes head on one of those self-defeating patterns of behavior** – arrogance. It isn’t that we start out to be arrogant, of course. It’s just that *those people we find annoying and less, you know, substantive, than we are bring out the worst in us.* I am *not trying* to be better than you, it just turns out, well, I am. I know, saying it out loud is the worst. But in American *culture we excel at blaming the victim.* She was wearing a mini skirt. He was walking in a bad neighborhood. And if it really is someone else’s fault –we don’t need to feel sorry for them or do anything about it.

Jesus is approached today by people with a similar frame of mind. Those people were murdered by Pilate – how scandalous – but they probably had it coming. “Do you think they were worse than everyone else – and you? Asks Jesus. Not a chance. *Get your own house in order* before judging someone else’s.

But there is another way to look at that first section and it is timely for us. In moments of conflict – *like the Roman occupation of Judea or the Russian invasion of Ukraine* – there is tragedy and there is rumor – and one doesn’t know at first which is which. The thing about this story is that Josephus – the Jewish historian – doesn’t record it. He was famous for gathering every story that made the Romans look bad – and he doesn’t have it. This has led some to suggest perhaps the people who came to Jesus made it up. To get Jesus in trouble.

“Do you know what those terrible people did?” Is an invitation to pile on. And if you don’t, you must be on the side of the offenders. This story is like when they came to Jesus and asked if they should pay taxes or not. No matter how he answered – he was in trouble. Jesus answers today – as he did when asked about the taxes – by finding a third way. Instead of either condemning or defending the Romans he goes down to the underlying assumption that most people of the time had that **those who suffer deserve it...**and squashes that assumption.

We tend to think this passage should make us feel bad...**“you better repent or you’re gonna’ get it!”** But the call to repentance is to those who have shown up

feeling superior and sure they can trap Jesus and get him into trouble with either the Roman authorities or the people.

To be clear – *we all have moments we need repentance* – but what does that mean? Does it mean an **unhealthy dose of self-loathing** because we think that will please God? Heaven forbid. When we do that – we are putting ourselves in the place of the people killed in the temple and by the falling tower *and assuming we deserve it* – just like the people trying to trap Jesus said we did...but we should do better than to trust their word. We should trust Jesus.

Repentance means we have been walking away from God and we turn around and walk back home to God. We have been doing things not pleasing to God and we give them up and do things which make God happy. That's it – no self-loathing required.

A helpful combination of words here helps us know what sorts of things we will want to walk away from. The first word for having done wrong in the passage stands for the things ***we knew we should do that we didn't***. The second word in the passage – for the same wrongdoing – is another word ***meaning the actual doing of something wrong***. I learned this week that there is a word in Aramaic which *encompasses both* these but not in Greek...so these different words are quite intentional and important.

And what about that fig tree? Well, in truth that part of the parable is aimed at religious leaders for failing to represent God to the people. But the important point here is that is that ***God wants us to succeed***. The word often translated as “a year” for the time they come back to check for fruit can and probably should be translated as, ***“in the future”*** – an open-ended time frame in which *grace cheers those on who need to repent* – and wants them to succeed. Otherwise, why dig around the tree and put manure on it?

We need the *spiritual confidence* to believe there is more to life than making mistakes – and more to who we are *than failing to live up to* arbitrary standards. Let's *give up* those self-defeating patterns of behavior – because the one who loves us best offers us grace – and wants us to succeed. This good news of God can keep us from destroying ourselves.