**St. Ambrose**

**Third Sunday in Lent**

**March 24, 2019**

**Luke 13:1-9**

*At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He 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 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.'"*

The most remarkable youth director I have ever worked with made a comment that completely threw me. She was talking to me about her work with the youth at a church I was serving. And after a moment’s silence, she added: “Sometimes I think I love what I am doing too much!”

When I asked her what she meant by that, she had a hard time articulating her feelings, but basically what she was saying was that perhaps service to God shouldn’t be such fun or so rewarding. It shouldn’t bring her so much joy. It should more difficult! I wondered where she got that idea from – that service to God shouldn’t bring us gladness! Was it from the school she attended as a child, her parents, a church, a priest?

She is not alone in believing that God’s demands are restrictive and possibly even punitive. Sadly, there are far too many Christians who have grown up in the shadow of a harsh and judgmental God whose main preoccupation it seems is to find some awful sin lurking in the depths of their souls.

The most dramatic example of this kind of negative attitude towards God that I have seen recently was in the opening scenes of the movie, “A Quiet Passion” about the life of poet, 19th century poet Emily Dickinson. In this scene, a mean-faced Mother Superior, head mistress of a girls’ school in England directs the young girls lined up in a hall to move right if they have sinned and wish to be saved by God, and to move left if they don’t. Those who choose not to be saved are, needless to say, given a weeping and gnashing of teeth send-off.

The young Emily Dickinson, though, doesn’t budge. She stands alone on the hall, unclear about what exactly is meant by sin, so refuses to be categorized. Needless to say, she infuriates the Mother Superior, and soon thereafter leaves the school and starts writing poetry, which has always been her passion. It was what she loved doing. It’s what made her come alive.

We should not be surprised to hear lines from one of her poems that reads:

“Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul –

and sings the tunes without the words, and never stops at all.”

Emily, even at her tender age, had an awareness that our lives are our becomings. Human beings, she intuited were drawn to fruitful life – living with hope, living with possibility, living with purpose, living with promise. This is the kind of life to which Jesus constantly points us.

The book of Job in the Old Testament is a perfect example of how people’s understanding of God is so often shaped by the culture into which we born, and how some challenge that understanding. As you probably remember, Job who is presented as a blameless, upright and prosperous family man upon whom satan inflicts one horrendous disaster after the other. Job undergoes enormous suffering, but despite the advice of his friends who express the prevailing attitude of the time – that Job must have done something wrong to deserve his punishment, Job will have nothing of it. He knows that stands blameless before God and is therefore unwilling either to blame God for his calamities, or to attribute his trials to God’s punishment for his behavior.

Job behaves in a profoundly counter-cultural way – by challenging the prevailing view that has persisted in some quarters for many millennia that we are the cause for the bad things that happen to us. Now, of course, there are countless situations where we are responsible for bad outcomes – an accident as a result of drinking or the repercussions when caught cheating on an exam or on one’s spouse are obvious examples.

However, there are just as many situations that cause deep suffering where no self-induced cause is involved – the death of a loved-one in an airline disaster or the victim of a mass shooting, to cite two examples in or our most recent past. Anyone who has done any chaplaincy work is only too aware of the prevalence of patients’ who attribute their life-threatening medical condition to God’s punishment for what they have or have not done in their lives.

Throughout the ages, people have grappled with questions related to sin, our culpability and God’s judgment. It’s just these questions that Jesus raises in the Gospel passage today. He asks the people around him whether they think that certain Galileans who suffered under Pilate were responsible for their fate. Was it because they were they worse sinners than the other Galileans?

I would love to be able to share with you Jesus’ answer to this perennial dilemma of why bad things happen and why so often it seems that bad things happen to good people, but guess what? Jesus doesn’t answer the very question he poses to his audience so we are left no wiser than were they.

This is so typical of how Jesus interacted with people, and I have to imagine, how Jesus interacts with us today. We don’t always get straight answers. But the question has been raised – the kind of question that is hard to ignore – one that we have to grapple with on our own. We are left to explore – rather, we are invited to explore ourselves and the world around us – to search out God’s wisdom. We are asked to “dig deeper!”

Instead, of answering the question he himself raised, Jesus immediately shifts the conversation to repentance, pointing out that all the Galileans are sinners –and that they, and by extension, all of us, need to acknowledge our sinfulness and repent.

What does Jesus mean by calling all of us sinners? Perhaps some of us, like Emily Dickinson, are also uncertain about exactly what is meant by sin.

What does sin mean to you?

Sometimes, as Christians, I think that our understanding of sin is quite limited – often referring to little more than moral issues. I believe, though, that it’s infinitely broader because sin is that which separates us from God and God’s intentions, made so clear to us in the life and work of Jesus, the incarnate expression of the Father. When we damage God’s magnificent earth, we are separating ourselves from God. When we damage other human beings, we separate ourselves from God. Every form of diminishment or exploitation of God’s creation separates us from God. In this Gospel passage, all Galileans, according to Jesus are culpable. All are found wanting. All have, in some way, separated themselves from God. Why would think that we are any different? None of us is perfect. None of us loves perfectly. We stumble, we make mistakes. We are works in progress. All of us.

There are times we produce good fruit – and times when we don’t.

The harsh tone in the last part of today’s Gospel reading remind us of the rigid and self-righteous Mother Superior casting her judgment on a group of young school girls by literally dispelling them from her sight – cutting them off. The absentee landlord, too, threatens to cut down the fig tree because for three years it has failed to produce fruit.

Is Jesus implying that God is like this landlord, and that if we don’t repent, we, too, will be cut off or cut down – banished from God’s presence? What do you think? And what of the gardener – is he representing Jesus appealing to his Father’s mercy, asking God to be patient and to give the fig tree a second chance? It’s not quite as neat as that. Once again, Jesus’ story puts us a little off kilter – leaving us to ponder and speculate on its meaning. There is more to unpack – there is more to consider. Once again, we are invited to search out God’s wisdom by going deeper.

So, what is your take-away from this really quite tricky passage?

After reading commentaries, having conversations with several people, and “digging deeper,” following are some of my thoughts about God as prompted by the Gospel reading this morning.

First of all, let me tell you what I don’t believe.

I do not believe that God is a punishing God. I do not believe that God makes bad things happen, any more than I believe that God was punishing the Galileans by killing them and then, adding blasphemous insult to terrible injury by mingling their blood with Roman sacrifices because they were worse sinners than the rest of their countrymen.

I do not believe that God cuts off God’s children – ever.

Now, what I do believe.

I believe that God is infinitely loving and infinitely merciful. I also believe that God is relentless – relentless in God’s pursuit of us – uncompromising in God’s longing for us to draw nearer to God, to experience God’s protection, God’s healing, God’s spaciousness, God’s peace and God’s joy.

I have to believe that God knows anger when we intentionally hurt God’s people and creation – that God gets frustrated by our stubbornness and determination to stay stuck in unrewarding and self-defeating behaviors – and that God is saddened by our unwillingness to become fully alive because of unexamined beliefs and undefined fear.

It seems to me that the potential tragedy of the fig tree story , which is not about God cutting us off, but rather of us cutting ourselves off – separating ourselves from the life of fruitfulness that God so freely offers us and longs to give us. That’s what I get from the landlord’s impatience.

But then, it seems to me, there is a quite lovely breakthrough. A deal is struck by the landlord and the compassionate gardener. Give me one year, says the gardener – I will make sure the tree is nourished and tended to – let’s see how things turn out a year from now. The tree has been given a second chance to be fruitful.

Do you see yourselves in this story? Do you see St. Ambrose in this story? Is God making it clear that, as St. Benedict said, “always we begin again,” and that we have yet another opportunity, personally and collectively to become more fruitful? Is God giving us God’s assurances that all the nourishment and tending required to make this so is already present – present in our personal and collective giftedness. Is this tender and faithful gardener prompting all of us to recognize and claim our individual spiritual gifts to bring to bear on the Body of Christ, which is this community in order to increase its fruitfulness?

Are we called to become more than we think we are?

I have been absolutely amazed in the short time I have been here to realize just how gifted this community is – and the passion and love that people have for God and for this church. I pray that as we continue our reflections during this Lenten season, we will start looking at those things about what we are passionate – those things we love, because that’s when we are most alive. The youth director I mentioned earlier was one of the most alive and loving individuals I have ever known – how I hope and pray that she begins to see that it is in the expression of her passion and doing what she loves that she is closest to God.

I will end today by asking you to ponder the following comment by Carl Frederick Buechner,

a Presbyterian minister, an American writer, novelist, poet, autobiographer, essayist, preacher, and theologian.

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

This is God calling us to be fruitful. This is God calling us to find those parts within ourselves that bring us joy. This is God asking us to discern our own gifts, claim them, and then use them in God’s mission, which is to bring us all into relationship with God, to heal all our divisions, to turn our separateness from God into unity with God, to ally ourselves with the source of life, and to restore all things to wholeness.