

Lent 3 Luke 13: 1-9

During this time of waiting – as we move with Jesus toward the cross, and beyond – it is absolutely clear to me that the Spirit of God has been hovering over our life together.

When we began this Lenten series, I said that the question we'd hold throughout, would be the question of suffering. Humans, earth, animals...suffering.

That's a hard thing to do. It's an arid, heavy place to be, And we said too, that it's not so much that we're expecting answers, as that we are allowing ourselves, challenging ourselves, and supporting one another as we go deep into the question.

I KNOW you've been going deep. I know that, by the look on your faces during worship. I know that because of conversations I've had with you in person or on the phone or on email or face book. You know from real and personal experience the reality of suffering and the soul-wrenching that comes along with it. Yes, you know the pain of the wilderness. AND you also know, in the midst of that, the presence of One on whose wings you are carried, under whose wings you find shelter and gentle strength.

Today's reading calls us deeper yet. Here in this passage, people come to Jesus with 2 events that had happened recently. Sort of like: "Hey, Jesus did you know about the floods in Africa this week? The earthquake in Columbia? So many people died. WHY?????"

Why do things like that happen? Sometimes, it's human beings deliberately choosing to hurt others. How does that fit into your understanding of this loving God you keep talking about, Jesus? And what about that earthquake a while ago – did you see on the news the faces of the moms who were waiting to see if their kids are alive? That wasn't human cruelty – that was....I don't even know what that was. Some people would say and act of God. How could a loving God let that happen???

The two examples they used from their time were these:

At that very time there were some present who told him 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."

Part of the interesting and fascinating thing about this is Jesus' answer. He doesn't let himself get bogged down in it. (at least that's my take) – he says "Do you think that God does that to punish people? No. No no no no NO! It's not about being punished and it's not how God works. If it were, we'd all be doomed. NO NO NO. God does NOT cause earthquakes or make people hurt one another. So get that out of your heads right not.

So why then?

There is no answer to that.

And the truth is, you could let yourself get so....paralyzed by those questions you'd be like the ducks in an oil spill....feathers matted with the sticky, filthy poison and unable to fly. So stuck, so gummed up in the why that you are unable to function in the world.

And you know what? There is life to be lived and work to be done and decisions to be made RIGHT NOW. We don't have the luxury of waiting around until we have all the answers to the mysteries of life....there are hurting people and also there are joyful and delicious experiences waiting for us. And he told them a story.

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 3 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 said "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 no, you can cut it down".

Isn't that great? And now we cut to the real chase. The question of suffering will always hover over us, perhaps,perhaps keeping us human. I wonder.

But the real question in the midst of that, is how we live in the mean time. We don't know the answer – perhaps some day we will. In the mean time there is real life to be lived. Real decisions to be made. Real fig trees not bearing fruit.

I just love this parable. What is the Spirit saying through this to you? Can I ask you to listen to it again....close your eyes...listen and let the Spirit speak.

Read it again

Who is the God figure here?

Parables are soooo cool! I love them because they won't stay still. They fly around....flit from branch to branch in our imaginations like a mischievous little bird, chirping and teasing and saying "find me now"

Or sometimes like one of those ravens in the parking lot....just looking you right in the eye, hopping once to let you pass, kind of daring you to figure it out.

Who is the God figure in this story? What would the parable say if God were the owner of the tree? That's been the traditional interpretation, you know....God, the owner of the tree...listen with those ears

Read it again

NOW what if God were the gardener?

Read it again

Personally, I can't see God as the owner. I don't think God EVER EVER says "cut that tree down" – But even so, then that would make US the gardeners, I think,yea I could work with that. Many of you in your jobs are that gardener figure....working with those the world has discounted, working with people that some would say "cut it down, they're not producing any fruit.....useless; they're just taking up space they'll never amount to anything" Know what I mean? Yes you do.

Sort of like cutting someone off the church roll because they haven't been to church in a while....

Being the gardener....the advocate for those whom the world would discount because they aren't producing the fruit we expect. Standing up and saying – ah – let me work with them. Let me work away at the roots....add some nourishment....we don't know what will happen, let's not act too fast. It's never too late for hope" ISN'T THAT A BEAUTIFUL IMAGE OF WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO DO AND BE FOR ONE ANOTHER? Never giving up on each other and on the ones who are down and out. Always willing to vote for life, for hope....patiently seeing the possibility, holding tight to the promise and to see the life in someone even when others can't. Willing to work hard at that; to get our hands dirty, to invest personally in the treethat interpretation has a lot going for it really.

Gardeners.

But – if as I suggested earlier, if GOD is the gardener, thenwhat does that say? Is this an image of God that is better suited to your understanding; your belief in the Holy One?

One more thing: Maybe this is pushing the metaphor too far, but what if that tree never did produce fruit? We aren't told if it ever did, but listen to a parable later on in the chapter: the same chapter, verses 18 and following:

He said therefore, what is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree and the birds of the air made their nests in its branches."

Maybe that tree never was meant to bear fruit - maybe it discovered its purpose in giving shelter and shade to birds.

Maybe the sin was not the sin of unfruitfulness but the sin of the owner for not seeing the real gift that the tree had within it; the sin of imposing an expectation on that beautiful tree that it could never fulfil, not because it was faulty but because the owner was blind to the real beauty and possibility it held within it. A shelter for the birds; a place for them to safely birth their young

As we face the realities of our world; the senseless suffering and the unanswered questions

Let us NOT bury our heads in the sand and avoid the pain by trite and pat answers that do not satisfy

Nor let us become so mired in the questions that we cannot soar to see a sunset, nor stoop to tend a tree that needs us. Let us live in hope – patient gardeners, and trees awaiting our time of fruitfulness

Let us live in hope