

No, I Tell You

© Rev. John Weicher
Sunday, March 24, 2019
Third Sunday in Lent
Luke 13:1-9

I grew up with Ben. We never went to the same school, but we lived in the same neighborhood, and we were the same age. He was in my Cub Scout den and later my Boy Scout troop. He and his family were regular members of our church. Ben was always pretty nerdy, in the way that people used to use that word, before it became a compliment or a badge of honor. Ben loved to read, so much so that when we did a skit in scouts that required him to be distracted, he read. He was smart, although not always thoughtful in the ways he shared his knowledge. He wasn't good at being social, according to the rest of us. He wasn't athletic, at all. He was a little weird. Like I said, he was nerdy.

I remember a youth retreat we went on in middle school to a conference center out in the country. We played games, and talked about our faith, and listened to Michael Jackson's song, *Man in the Mirror*, which felt very deep and meaningful at the time. It was Ben, me and several other middle schoolers, both the regulars we saw on Sundays and some youth who were infrequent attenders at best. Two of those infrequent youth were Asher and Bert, and they were as cool as Ben was uncool. Asher and Bert went to one of the fanciest and most selective private schools. They were big athletes. I sort of remember them driving convertibles, even though I know that's impossible for 13-year-olds. If this were a cheesy 1980s movie, you'd identify them as the popular kids the moment they stepped on screen. They were new-ish, and that added to their allure, but it also meant they didn't really know us. And they didn't really know Ben. They hadn't gotten used to him over the years, which is both truthful and totally unfair for me to say.

In the middle of the night, Asher and Bert snuck out of their beds. They grabbed a black, permanent marker. And they crept over to Ben's bunk. Very carefully, they wrote four big letters on his forehead. D, O, R, K. Dork. He did not wake up in the moment. He did, of course, wake up the next morning, as embarrassed and angry as a person can be. He had to walk by all of us to get to the bathroom to wash it off, which took a lot of doing. In the moment, and even in retrospect, it's hard to imagine a more heinous prank.

“At that very time, there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” The Roman governor of Judea, when Jesus was teaching, had killed some Jewish rebels and their blood had literally run together with the blood of the animals being sacrificed in the Temple as a part of the worship of God. How profane. How insulting. How enraging. How very heinous.

If indeed, our God is a God of the marginalized, the poor and oppressed, the nerds and the dorks, then surely divine justice would be swiftly coming. Things would be set right. Parents would be called. People would be punished. Apologies would be offered. Holiness would be restored. Pilate and Asher and Bert and the rest of the Roman government would be toppled, because mighty is our God, and blessed are the meek and the nerdy, for they shall inherit the earth.

Ben went on to invest that great love of reading into the most mysterious and profound of books, the Bible. He became a Biblical scholar. The other youth and I rallied around him, making him feel cool at church, even if he didn't feel cool anywhere else. He turned that outsider-ness into empathy and was a fabulous deacon. Asher and Bert were punished thoroughly, and never showed their faces at middle school youth group again.

But, no, I tell you, that's not what happened at all. No, I tell you, that's not the way the world works. No, I tell you, when it came time for confirmation, Ben didn't want to go through with it, and who could blame him. Church was clearly not a place for him, he had learned.

We were around each other less after 8th grade. He had dropped out of Boy Scouts, and I didn't see him at church in high school that I can remember. My folks and his folks still live in the old neighborhood, and they chat occasionally. Last I heard, he had never darkened a church door again. Asher and Bert, meanwhile, may have gotten in some trouble, but I don't remember it. It must have happened off screen. They did get confirmed by the session, but I never saw them at church again either, that I can remember. Nobody won – not Asher and Bert, not the church, not Jesus, certainly not Ben. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Surely you've heard the phrase, "Everything happens for a reason." In ancient Israel, they took that idea seriously. When bad things happened to people, it was God's divine wrath, punishment for what they had done, or for what their parents or grandparents had done, because wrathful punishment, like left-handedness or long toes, runs in the family. That's what those folks were asking Jesus about – if those Galileans whose blood had been spilled and then mixed in with the sacrificial animal blood, were they just worse, more sinful folks than everyone else? No, Jesus tells us. That's not how God works.

Well then, surely the opposite is true. The Pilates, the Ashers and Berts of the world, the bullies who spill that blood and write on people's foreheads, they will get it in the end. They are the worst sinners. They deserve the divine punishment. Boy, doesn't that feel right? Doesn't that feel righteous? It does. Bring on the wrath, O God. Except, Jesus doesn't say that here, either. It seems like he should, but he doesn't, not here. He doesn't take the bait. That's not how this world works. The bad guys are not always vanquished. Why do bad things happen to good people, we wonder. And why don't bad things happen to bad people, we mutter under our breath. For all the world, we may want them to, but God doesn't pull that trigger.

So, there is sin, and there is death, but divine justice is just that, *divine* justice. It happens off screen. We can't order it from our phones to rain down on one sinner or another. Such is the mystery, albeit the annoying, frustrating mystery, of God. Sure, repentance is necessary, Jesus says, for all of us. People need to change their ways, regardless of falling towers or heinous pranks. You are people, and I am people, and we need to change our ways. Jesus is quite clear on this. Faith is not an invitation to righteous indignation. It is a call to repentance for anyone with human DNA.

Jesus tells this parable about a barren fig tree, a heroic gardener, and certain doom. The fig tree isn't producing figs, which seems like the most important thing it could do, and the owner of

the whole vineyard is wondering why it's taking up space and soil and sunlight if there are no Fig Newtons to be had at the end of the day. The gardener intercedes, extracting just a little more time for the tree. By the end of the parable, we can hear the ticking clock, counting down to the sure end of that sinful tree. They are the tree, those Pilates and Ashers, just waiting to be struck down, we sneer. Or maybe we are the tree, we worry, we who have not borne good fruit, we who have watched silently from our bunk while Bert and Asher snuck over to Ben in the middle of the night, we who have committed sins of omission, if not commission. Surely, we are all the tree. That's the easy way to read what Jesus says.

No, I tell you. The thing about parables is that they are hard to handle. We want them to be a solid object, easily manipulatable, something we can hold in our hands and maybe throw at somebody else, if the opportunity arises. Instead, it turns out that parables are a goo, not quite solid, not quite liquid, sort of like that slime that was all the rage for children to play with a few years ago. Anytime we want to pick up a parable and hurl it, it slips through our fingers and collects on the counter in front of us, making a mess and a mockery. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," God tells the prophet Isaiah. So let us not be so sure that you or I or they are the tree in this little vignette. Let's not be so quick to assume that God is about to chop folks down at the knees, as if God were just like Pilate but with different team colors.

What if, what if instead of being the fig tree, we are the soil?

What if Bert, Ben, those Galileans with the comingled blood, the 18 folks on whom the tower fell, you and I, what if we're all the vineyard God owns, the vineyard that God has always owned, the vineyard created in the image of the Divine, the vineyard in need of much care in a world of bullies, abominations and political hierarchies? Instead of God sharpening the divine hatchet for a year while gardener Jesus does his darnedest to get us to bear some kind of fruit, *any* kind of fruit, even rhubarb, God is keenly aware of the ways that we are being wasted and wasting ourselves. What if the subtext in those words is love and not anger?

Bert and Asher are not the tree. The tree is the bullying that grows out of them. The tree is the insecurity and the social hierarchy, the lack of kindness and the fun at another's expense. All of them are the tree growing out of the soil, out of Asher and Bert, and if those things cannot bear some kind of good fruit, instead of hate and embarrassment and sadness, then, certainly God should cut that tree down, so that something else good might grow out of the soil.

The human being Pilate is not the tree. The tree is the Roman political apparatus that gives power to some on the backs of others, the distinction between Roman citizens and non-Romans, the system of rich and poor, the tendency to want not only to kill rebel leaders but to do so in the most painful and embarrassing way conceivable, using a cross – all of that is the tree. And if Pilate's power and leadership can't bear some kind of good fruit, well then, God will cut it down, so that something else good might grow.

We are not the tree. The tree is all the stuff that grows out of us. The tree is the sins we commit, the ways we participate in an unjust system, the micro-aggressions and macro-aggressions, the times we are mean or selfish or uncaring. The tree is the acts of grace we don't commit, the

times when we stay in bed watching as the bullies walk by, clearly up to no good. And if all our actions and non-action don't bear some kind of good fruit, some kind of God fruit, then God will cut it down, so that something else good might grow out of us instead.

Maybe, that's what Lent really is – a season of God cutting down the things in our lives and the parts of ourselves that do not bear any fruit worth eating. This is the season when Jesus the gardener is tending to us especially closely, fertilizing and pruning, to see what good fruit might be about to grow. Ever the optimist, that Jesus. But thanks be to the God who plows under sin and faithlessness. Thanks be to the God who uproots that which is not worthy of our divine soil, watered with the watering can full of baptismal water. Thanks be to God that repentance is an open invitation to you and to me, regardless of the towers or the bullies or Pilates of this world. Thanks be to the God who cares about us enough about that soil that is you and the soil that is I. Thanks be to the God who cuts down. Amen.