

C Lent 3 3.20.22

1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Focus Statement: God prunes us with care, under God there is always time for cutting and growth.

In the sermon podcast I listen to, Karoline Lewis said this week in no uncertain terms, “it is irresponsible to read the second reading for this Sunday and not preach on it. So, if you’re not going to preach on it, you better not read it.” I listened to the podcast this week after I had already printed the bulletins, so, here we go. Let’s talk about Paul and this second reading.

As we dig into it, it is also probably worth noting that neither the second reading nor the Gospel leave us with real warm fuzzy feelings this morning. The author of a commentary on the second reading remarked that this text is one of those that might tempt a preacher to choose another text altogether, “although the Gospel proposed by the Revised Common Lectionary for this Sunday might not be your first choice either!” It’s also worth noting that the two texts seem to contradict each other. In the Gospel Jesus was all, no, these people who had horrible things happen to them were not worse sinners than everyone else, they didn’t have it coming. But, by the way, you better repent or else bad things will happen to you. Whereas Paul was all, don’t forget how your ancestors were all together with God, and then they screwed up and God destroyed them so, you know, watch out. But don’t worry because God will never give you more than you can handle. Whether the takeaway is bad stuff happens to good people, but you better be good or bad stuff will happen to you or bad stuff happens to bad people, but God will temper the bad; fun fact, I like none of this news for preaching.

But this, dear people of God, is what we have. It's what the lectionary gives us today. And, honestly, I think there is some really good, positive, and hopeful news here. There is great promise and potential in these texts. We just have to be careful to not let them be used against us or against others in ways that take away from that promise.

The first good news to take away from both of these texts is they are keeping us from the easy—and wrong—response to both bad things and good things, you had it coming. You deserve this. The negative side, from the Gospel reading, it a little simpler to parse out. No, the Galileans did not deserve their fate, nor did those killed in the building collapse.

Sometimes bad things just happen. And we know this, right. We know this. We know this, but when bad things happen, and especially when bad things happen to other people, we still grasp for easy answers. People are in poverty because they make poor choices. You got sick because you didn't get enough sleep, or didn't eat the right organic foods, or didn't whatever. It's not racism that black Americans make up thirteen percent of the US population and over a third of the prison population, it's that they commit a third of the crimes. To these easy—and wrong—answers, God gives an emphatic no. The people of Ukraine are not worse sinners because their country was invaded. Their country was invaded. Economic inequality is sin, but not sin on the part of those in poverty. The same goes with racism. It's sin alright, and tragically more often than not, not the sin of the incarcerated. Here's a couple more fun facts for you. Half of all people who have been exonerated for wrongful conviction are black. Black people in this country are seven times more likely to be falsely convicted of murder. And when those wrongful convictions occur,

it takes forty-five percent long to get those convictions overturned than for a white prisoner, if they are overturned at all. The point of all these numbers is this: sin is certainly going on, but who deals with the consequences of sin are by and large not the ones who committed it.

The Corinthians example is a little trickier because it forces us to look closely not at when things are going poorly, but when they're going well. The church in Corinth at the time was dealing with an issue where a bunch of new Gentile Christians had come into the church and they were all super geeked about how great they were at being Christian, and how the greatness of their faith had led to them having all these great opportunities and privileges, deserving even all these great opportunities and privileges. We're not like the Jews that God had to punish for all their faithlessness. We're followers of Christ, we're above all that. And to them, Paul is saying, no. The Old Testament isn't a story of people who used to be bad and you who've risen above it. It's history, our history, all our history, and it's a lesson to remind us that all our ancestors were shielded by God, and they still made mistakes. You will too. Success is not God demonstrating your awesomeness, any more than suffering is God's punishment. We live in a world where, because of free will, ours and everyone else's, things happen, things both wonderful and terrible, and in those things, through those things, there too is God.

The First Corinthians reading ends with what Karoline Lewis declared to be the most treacherous verse of the whole passage: "God is faithful, and God will not let you be tested beyond your strength." Oh but has this verse ever led us to so much bad pop theology. Bad

interpretations of this verse just feed on our American individualism, that we and we alone can and do have control over our lives, and so does everyone else. This idea that God won't give someone more than they themselves alone can handle is a devious way to glorify suffering, you've got so much more on your plate because God just knows you're strong and you can handle it is not what Paul is saying. Part of the misinterpretation lies in, you guessed it, translation error. Well, not so much error as the limitations of English. Outside of the American South, we don't have a plural you. You is you, whether it is one you, or a million yous. It's just you. But Greek, like the South, has a plural you, and that plural you is who will not be tested beyond your strength. It is a communal you. Ukraine may be tested beyond its strength, which is why we through Lutheran World Federation is supporting the people there and in neighboring countries with necessary supplies and professionals. Co-op members are tested beyond their strength daily, and we do the best we can as a congregation to bear some of that load with them. Systemic racism tests all of us, but the work needs to be done by those of us in privilege. The good news in the plural is if you're suffering, this passage isn't for you, it's for your neighbor. The challenge is for us who are the neighbor, to step in and bear our load.

Which loops us, believe it or not, back to the Gospel. "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Jesus asked the gathered crowd. "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." No, they were not worse sinners for suffering in this way, and yet there is need in all of us for repentance. Not in order to avoid having terrible things happen to us but simply because of the faithfulness of God to stand with us in times both good and hard.

Tough things happen, dear people of God. Hard things happen. I was reading a commentary on the First Corinthians passage by religion professor Ralph C. Wood, who shared of having a woman come up to him after a lecture and asking him if he had noticed that people who do not believe in Jesus come to a sticky end. He remarked, "I could not help replying, 'I thought that Jesus himself came to a sticky end.'" He went on, "what counts is God's own faithfulness to us, enabling us to live faithfully for God amid all the chances and changes of our existence."

It is in God's own faithfulness that we encounter the parable of the barren fig tree and the gardener. There are, like with any parable, multiple ways to read it. A couple of ways particularly stuck in my heart this week. The first is, probably the most interpretation. We are the barren fig tree, Jesus the patient gardener, begging for just one more year to tend and care, in hopes that fruit will grow. Another is us as the impatient landowner, how long must we wait for this world to bear fruit! Jesus again the patient gardener, be calm, have patience. The Kingdom of God is slow growing, give it more time for the fruit to develop. The way that captured my heart the most this week was Matt Skinner, in the same podcast that Karoline Lewis said you better preach on First Corinthians this week, urging us to focus not on any of the characters at all, but on this aspect of time. The good news Matt saw in this parable is this promise of time. That there is time yet, to dig around, to tend, to nurture, in order for fruit to develop. Time for us, for our community, for this broken world. The kingdom of God is already but not yet, there is still time for repentance and change.

There is still time and, here's maybe the weirdest thing I heard as good news in this passage this week, that time is not limitless. The fig tree gets another year, but after that year the tree will be reassessed and trees that do not bear fruit have to be cut down to leave room for one that will, because the whole community cannot suffer for the sake of one tree. Dear people of God, this is good news because there are certainly parts of me, of my soul, and of this world, that are not bearing good fruit, and that I want God to cut down and leave space for something new to grow. Take the ax, O Lord, to my greed, my pride, my self-absorbed ways. Cut down the racism, violence, and inequality that infect our institutions, so that justice and righteousness can grow. This passage promises a God who is a careful gardener, not ham-handed like my efforts, taking time to nurture life and prune so that more life will grow. With this parable on my heart in this way, I started hearing the first part of this passage not as "repent or perish" but "repent and perish." Because I want God in this Lenten season to put to death all that is inside of me that is not life-giving, so that the Kingdom of God can grow.

Dear people of God, the summary of these passages is this. Your suffering is not a measure of your personhood, and neither is your success. The measure of your personhood, of this whole wonderful, terrible, and beautiful creation, is God who is faithful. There is, thanks be to God, judgment and pruning for the sinful parts of ourselves, and for the parts with potential, there is always one more year for repentance. Thanks be to God. Amen.