

When the Gospel is a Mirror
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 Luke 13:1-9

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."

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.'"

There is an old legend about three men and their bags. Each man had two bags, one tied in front of his neck and the other tied on his back. When the first man was asked what was in his bags, he said, "In the bag on my back are all the good things friends and family have done. That way they're hidden from view. In the front bag are all the bad things that have happened to me and the bad things I have done. Every now and then I stop, open the front bag, take the things out, examine them, and think about them." Because that man stopped so much to concentrate on all the bad stuff, he really didn't make much progress in life.

The second man was asked about his bags. He replied, "In the front bag are all the good things I've done. I like to see them, so quite often I take them out to show them off to people. The bag in the back? I keep all my mistakes in there and carry them all the time. Sure they're heavy. They slow me down, but you know, for some reason I can't put them down."

When the third man was asked about his bags, he answered, "The bag in front is great. There I keep all the positive thoughts I have about people, all the blessings I've experienced, all the great things other people have done for me. The weight isn't a problem. The bag is like sails of a ship. It keeps me going forward."

"The bag on my back is empty. There's nothing in it. I cut a big hole in its bottom. In there I put all the bad things that I can think about myself or hear about others. They go in one end and out the other, so I'm not carrying around any extra weight at all."

What are you carrying in your bags? What are we as a church carrying in our bag?

In this morning's text, Jesus is confronted with an account of Pilate having done something terrible, slaughtering a group of Galileans who were offering sacrifices in the Temple. Human and animal blood had intermingled on the floor. Pilate was well-known for his harsh treatment of the Jews, particularly those who protested his siphoning of funds from the Temple treasury. Wasn't it true, they asked, that these Galileans were being punished by God for having done something wrong? Jesus refuses to give in to this. He even sites his own example, reminding his hearers of a story where a tower had collapsed and killed several bystanders. Were these victims of Pilate and these victims of the tower worse sinners than everyone else?

Jesus' answer is no. Life is not that simple. We are not to simply assume that bad things always happen to the bad and good things happen to the good. Jesus refuses here to answer the question of why bad things happen to good people. Instead, Jesus insists upon keeping his hearers on task: do not absorb yourself in the sins and consequences of the sins of your neighbors. Unless you repent, he says, you will perish just as they did.

Stay focused, Stay on task. Discipline yourselves. Prepare for the coming of the Lord.

How easy it is to fascinate ourselves with the sins of others. Why is this? Could it be that if we are busy looking at all of the mess, all of the sin, all of the problems in someone else's bag we can keep our minds off of all of the stuff that is in our own? Could it be that as long as we can focus on the sins of someone else that we need not face our own? Could it be that as long as we focus on our own sins, we have just cause to remain where we are in life, feeling as though we are stuck, and that we will never be anything other than who we are today?

In this morning's text, Jesus is not simply our friend. He is our savior, indeed, but he is also our judge who is concerned with the things that are separating us from God. IN today's gospel reading, Jesus is holding up a mirror to all of humanity, allowing us to see ourselves as we are. Jesus is the healer of our souls, which means he also is the physician who first diagnoses our disease.

It reminds me of when I was a kid in grade school and I would come home with a bad grade. The conversation would go something like this:

Mom: A *C* how did you get a *C*? Did you forget to study for this?

Me: But some other kids got *D*'s and *F*'s!

Mom: Right now, I think you need to just worry about Doug.

And I did not want to just worry about Doug, and worrying about (which, for me, was code for blaming) others seemed to be my best defense.

We do not want to look into our own bags. We don't want to face that in us which God is calling us, leading us, empowering us to change. So we are fascinated by those who get in trouble, those who seem "worse" than we do. We rail against those we call sinners because it distracts from our own story, our own sin, our own lives, and our own pain. Because we do not want to face that which is inside us that is not as it should be. We do not want to face and let go of the past and for that reason, the past serves as a rudder which, though located behind us, continues to steer us and keep us on our present course.

This is why Jesus calls us to repentance. This is why repentance is so urgent for Jesus; Not only because we will someday be held accountable for our lives, but because continuing to live the old way means that we are not living the new and abundant lives that God wills for us, that Christ makes possible for us, lives which are unencumbered from the bags of pain and sin and regret that weigh us down.

C.S. Lewis writes that What do people mean when they say, 'I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?' Have they never even been to a dentist?" We *expect* those who care for us to tell us the truth, to convict us, so save us from harm. We *expect* the dentist to tell us when we are facing decay in our lives. We expect to hear that hard news and hear those consequences, and to be shown a new way to live. Why would we expect any less from our Savior?

God not only identifies and convicts us of our sin, God *cleanses* and *heals* us of our sin, frees us from our past, and emancipates us from the things that harm us, that separate us from God, the things by which we feel so enslaved. God cleanses us, prunes us of all that is old and dead and makes us new. However, God then expects us to do something with that new life given to us. God expects that new life to be visible in the ways we live and the choices we make. God expects us to bear fruit!

In today's text, Jesus tells a story of a man who is fed up with the fact that his fig tree will not bear fruit, even after three years. He is ready to cut it down, yet the gardener tells him to give it a year. Let me work on it, the gardener says. Let's give it a year and see if it bears fruit.

Do you think it is a coincidence that when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on Easter and saw Jesus alive, that she mistook him for a gardener? Christ is the gardener who intercedes for us, who asks for mercy for us, and who gives us the nurturing we need to leave the past behind us and go and bear fruit. Yet to go and bear fruit, we must be willing to shed that within us that is not right. We must be willing to be pruned of those things that prevent us from bearing fruit. We must be willing to cut a whole in the bottom of our bag of bad things and leave it all behind.

We must do this not only because the pain we feel, the wrong we have done, the mistakes we have made are not the best we have to offer from our lives to God. We must

also do this because if we keep dragging around our sin and all the negativity that comes with it, sooner or later, what is in that bag will poison us. It will keep us from bearing fruit. It is the world who wants to keep digging up all the old stuff. It is worldly thinking that teaches us that we cannot leave the past behind us. It is the world that teaches us that we are barren plants that have not bore fruit in the past and there is no reason to believe that we will ever bear fruit in the future.

And if we do not trust the option Christ gives us to cut a hole in that old bag and leave our old lives behind us then we can start believing all those things that the world says about us as individuals, about us as a church, about us as a denomination, and about us as a religion, as a people of God.

Yet if we accept Christ's invitation to discipleship and follow him on the way of the cross, we can be new people; we can bear fruit worthy of repentance. We can have new life. And if we as a congregation accept Christ's invitation to believe that there can be a new harvest of spiritual fruit then we can bear that fruit, here and now in this place, and we can be a voice, a beacon that says to a suffering world, bent over with the weight of sin on its back the words of the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed

"Come, all you who are thirsty,
 Come to the waters;
 And you who have no money,
 Come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 Without money and without cost.
 Why spend money on what is not bread,
 And your labor on what does not satisfy?
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
 And your soul will delight in the richest of fare.
 Give ear and come to me;
 Hear me, that your soul may live.

GLORIA IN EXCELSIS DEO.