

### Don't Blame Victims, Help Them

Today's Gospel wrestles with what may be humanity's most constant question for God: why do bad things happen and, when they do, who's to blame? Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem when some of his followers come to tell him that Pilate has slaughtered a group of Galileans as they were making sacrifices. Jesus replies by referring to what might have been a construction accident. We have no historical references for either of these events, although we know that Pilate was a violent monster and buildings sometimes collapse. This conversation appears only in the Gospel of Luke, so we can't look to Matthew, Mark, or John for additional insights. We can surmise, though, that the crowd knows about the fallen tower and Pilate's latest atrocity. They want to know why these tragedies happened. Jesus responds, as he so often does, by reframing the discussion with a parable. It's not immediately obvious how this parable answers his followers' questions, though, so let's dig in.

As the Reverend Robb McCoy of the *Pulpit Fiction* podcast points out, the first half of this passage is essentially the Book of Job in four verses. Job tells the story of a blameless man who suffers terrible misfortune when Lucifer tries to prove to the Father that humanity cannot sustain faith in the face of calamity. Job is the oldest book in the Bible, written almost two thousand years before the birth of Christ. People have asked why bad things happen for an extraordinarily long time, and neither the Father nor Jesus has provided a definitive answer. The Father tells Job that he's asking for an explanation that a mere mortal can't comprehend. Jesus skips the "why," going straight to what the crowd really wants to know. Misfortune is not God cruelly punishing us for sin. When bad things happen, through the misdeeds of evil or foolish people or by accident, the victims are not to blame. That may not satisfy those who want life to mirror tidy patterns of cause and effect. Some actions do have predictable consequences.

Dishonor your parents, cheat on your spouse, covet your neighbors' possessions, lie, steal, or murder, and your relationships will suffer. Disrespect or discount God, ignore the Sabbath, worship false idols like money, power, or fame, and your soul will suffer. That suffering isn't God's punishment. It's the natural outcome of misbehaviors that God has lovingly warned us to avoid. Still, suffering hurts. That's why Jesus tells his followers that we will perish like Pilate's victims and those killed in the tower collapse unless we bring ourselves around to a serious change of heart.

Jesus calls on us to "repent" in this translation but, as Reverend McCoy and his colleague the Reverend Eric C. Fistler observe, that word doesn't best capture what he means. Luke uses the Greek *metanoneó* (μετανοέω) which, according to Strong's Lexicon, implies "a change of mind or heart." Jesus doesn't want his followers to punish ourselves so that God won't punish us first. He wants us to change our hearts and recognize that it doesn't matter why misfortunes happen. What matters is how we respond. That's where the Parable of the Fig Tree comes in.

The parable opens with a vineyard owner and his gardener examining a fig tree. The tree hasn't borne fruit in the three years since it was planted, and the vineyard owner wants to chop it down. But the gardener recommends giving the tree another year of good care before destroying it. Some see this sweet little story as an allegory of divine wrath and redemption, with the tree symbolizing sinful humankind and the gardener representing Jesus, who intercedes with his Father the vineyard owner to save us from damnation. It's a harsh interpretation that presents the Father in an undeservedly vindictive light. As Dr. Justo González points out in his commentary on Luke's Gospel, however, it's also an attractive interpretation for those who "like to think that we have comfortable houses, when so many are homeless, or a substantial income, when so many are poor, or all kinds of food to eat, when so many are ill, because we have somehow been

particularly faithful.” All good things come by God’s grace, and we’re right to thank him for them. If we decide that God wants those who lack our blessings to suffer, though, we miss Jesus’s point along with the opportunity to bring God’s Kingdom closer by offering our help.

We tend to look for the Father in all of Jesus’s parables. In this story, that’s probably a mistake. Jesus tells us that “a man” had a fig tree planted in his vineyard – not a lord, much less *the* Lord, just an ordinary, impatient man. Jesus’s audience would have known that a new fig tree takes up to six years to bear fruit, with three years being the normal minimum. Patience is essential for a tree to mature enough to yield a generous harvest. Without his gardener’s advice, the impetuous vineyard owner might have cut down a perfectly healthy fig tree and been left to wait years for its replacement to bear fruit. Our Father is many things, but impetuous he’s not. The vineyard owner more likely represents impatient people who expect everything in life to happen exactly as they think it should, gleefully assigning blame whenever things go wrong.

Continuing with that interpretation, even if the gardener doesn’t represent Jesus himself, his words express Jesus’s merciful point of view. The poor fig tree probably symbolizes some portion of humanity. Though imperfect, it doesn’t deserve to be destroyed. To draw on Dr. González, this tree isn’t unproductive because it’s lazy, obstinate, or evil. It just needs more attention and time. And as Reverends Fistler and McCoy observe, the Hebrew Scriptures make it plain that God created us to be Eden’s gardeners. Jesus’s audience would have known that, too, so they would have understood this parable as a gentle reminder that good gardeners are patient and compassionate, quick to care for the suffering of others without concern for their sins. The question shouldn’t be why the Galileans and accident victims died or whether they deserved their fate, but what the community can do to take care of their survivors.

This passage seems especially pertinent in our time. Since the 1860s, when self-proclaimed “scientific management” experts like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Frank Bunker Gilbreth persuaded industrialists to maximize profits by adopting “systematic work methods” better suited to machines than to human workers, efficiency has become a pagan idol at whose altar corporate America fervently worships. The Horatio Alger myth that anyone can escape poverty through hard work and personal virtue has given birth to a toxic individualism that ignores inconvenient truths and roundly condemns anyone who is disadvantaged by our decidedly inequitable social structures. The myth that “continuous improvement” is possible has largely been discredited, but not before inspiring too many authority figures to burden their subordinates with unachievable goals. I’m especially troubled when pastors preach a “Prosperity Gospel” that points to worldly wealth as proof of God’s favor and worldly poverty as punishment for sin. Jesus is clear. God doesn’t punish our sins with poverty. We who are blessed to speak from his pulpits have no business misrepresenting his words.

Human beings and their institutions are imperfect. If efficiency is your only god, you’ll imagine ineptitude and waste wherever you go. Jesus asks us to stop looking for flaws and start looking for potential. If someone is sick or injured, we’re called to offer support. If someone is poor, we’re called to share what we have. If someone is victimized, we’re called to defend them. If someone causes or contributes to their own misfortune, we’re called to help them learn to do better without shaming them first. And if a person or an institution isn’t producing as abundantly or efficiently as we’d like, we’re called to devote thoughtful attention to improving things before we go grabbing for a chainsaw. Above all, we’re called to resist the temptation to deny help to those in need because we imagine God wants them to suffer. Jesus assures us that he does not. Some fig trees just take longer to bear fruit than others. But for God’s grace, any of us could be

such a tree; by God's grace, we all get to be the gardeners. All we have to do is let Jesus change our hearts and then tackle what needs to be done. When we do, good fruit will follow. Amen.