

Visions of Jesus for Our Time (IV): Generous Judge
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
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Text: Luke 13:1-9

It was the photograph of the Atlanta rescue workers and paramedics that completely undid me, as I tearfully read the *Plain Dealer* account of the tragic bus accident resulting in six deaths from the Bluffton College family. They had been first on the scene, administering first aid, calming what must have been a scene of utter chaos, and carrying out the bodies of the persons who had been killed. The photograph had been taken from the overpass above, and showed the emergency workers huddled around, with dazed and bewildered looks on most of their faces. Some of them had their heads buried in their hands, as if in prayer or despair. What struck me about it was that no one appeared to be speaking; instead they seemed to wordlessly express the sheer terror of chance: an unfamiliar highway, a mistaken choice, an unthinkable outcome. I recall the trepidation I felt each year as the parent of a college student when it came to the choice of a spring break trip—and always figured the ones involving a large group and adult supervision held almost no risk.

Life, for better or worse, equals risk. Accidents happen. Hurricanes happen. Things completely outside our control impose their consequences upon us. Sometimes we act ignorantly or unskillfully. We make poor choices. There's a certain randomness reflected in the very fabric of the universe: most buses traveling to sporting events arrive safely; this one did not. Thankfully, most of the bus passengers escaped with their lives; why didn't those particular six persons? Was it simply the bad luck of seat location relative to the impact?

People of faith have long struggled with the question of why bad things happen to good people. Many of us reject the notion of a God who is the author of human tragedy, or who

wills disease or accident upon persons as punishment or to get our attention or to teach us some profound truth. But I wonder if in rejecting this view of God we have perhaps unconsciously rejected the notion of God of judge, the One who does evaluate human choices and actions in light of Divine will. In my adult years I have not found threats of divine judgment either compelling or effective incentives to good behavior. I don't want to return to a puritanical view that we are sinners "in the hands of an angry God." But I also recognize—as you do—that things are not as they should be. Something fundamental is broken and our knowledge, our creativity, even our good will seem incapable of fixing whatever it is. *Love one another* our faith exhorts us. Only we can't. Or don't. So today we will explore a vision of Jesus as judge, as the One who comforts the afflicted, but who also afflicts the comfortable when such affliction wakes us to the truth about our lives. The morning text addresses both sides of that equation, the comfort and affliction, bad news/good news, judgment and grace. Listen for God's word to you in the reading from the gospel according to Luke in the thirteenth chapter at the first verse: [LUKE 13:1-9]

The same day the Bluffton College bus tragedy occurred, a bomb exploded in Baghdad, wreaking death and destruction in a crowded marketplace. The two incidents, so heartbreaking, almost perfectly mirror the situations raised in the gospel reading. The first, set in motion by human design, concerned Galileans who came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the temple—an act of religious devotion—and were slain on order of the Roman Governor Pilate. What did they do wrong to merit such fate? Jesus explicitly states what they have only implied. "Do you think these folks were worse sinners than all the others?" and then resolutely rejects that assessment. As if to go even farther down that road, Jesus asks them about another disastrous event in their recent memory: a tower that had fallen, killing eighteen people. "Do you think those who were killed were worse offenders than anyone else living there?" Jesus doesn't wait for their answers. "No, I tell you." Whether by human hand or blind chance terrible things

sometimes happen. But why oh why does he go on to say—twice!—“.....that unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” Instead of a comforting word assuring us that no, bad things are not a sign of God’s wrath and punishment, we get this.....an in-your-face warning about cleaning up our act and getting right with God, pronto.

Before we even have time to let the implications of that sink in, Jesus tells a parable which on first reading seems unrelated. Fig tree. No figs. Not a one, for three years. Conclusion? Cut it down. The end. Only a sympathetic gardener intervenes. “Give it one more chance to produce figs. I’ll tend it, and put on some fertilizer, and we’ll see what happens. If it doesn’t bear fruit, well, *then*, you can cut it down.”

The common thread in these two sections seems to be judgment. Some kind of change has to be made, or there will be hell to pay. But it’s more complex than we might have imagined. The God we worship is not captive to a Newtonian world view: for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. Faith does not flatten reality into some manageable system of reward and punishment; you-reap-what-you-sow. Faith reveals instead life’s infinite contours and multiple facets. Jesus acknowledges you can’t protect yourselves from every disaster. Bad things happen sometimes to good people. Yet you *are* responsible for your actions and decisions; you are accountable for the “fruit” - or lack of it—in your life. Moreover, Jesus seems to give a reality check to the ones who might be tempted to impugn the motives or the actions of those around them; you are not so different from them after all, because you, too are going to die. It’s not to make them—or us—afraid that Jesus offers this bald reminder of life’s uncertainty. Or maybe Jesus understood that they were already afraid, and called attention to it so that they might recognize it too, and see what might be done about it.

Social scientists will tell you that fear is not all together a bad thing. As a survival mechanism, it’s pretty effective. Fight or flight, remember? It may send an adrenaline surge that will

help us get off dead center. It may plunge us into darkness for a time, thereby forcing us to search diligently for a lighted pathway out. Fear is a common emotion among all human beings. We won't get out of life alive. Not one of us.

The only antidote to fear I know is faith in God. Not faith as a "thing"—a totem or a rabbit's foot to protect us from falling. Neither is faith a lucky charm that improves our chances for good luck to smile upon us (like my friend who plays his baptismal date in the state lottery). Christian faith is faith in the Living One; a relationship for all times and seasons. Before God we all stand in need. We are all on the short side of the ledger—for what we have done, and just as much, for what we have left undone. For deeds done in secret; for indifference and inaction in our common life. The call to "repent" is quite simply, a call to turn around, to go another way, to face in a different direction: toward God, toward the One who made us and loves us...to death, and then to life again. As I look carefully and honestly at my own life, I see one thing quite clearly: repentance—re-orienting myself toward God - is something I need to do again and again and again. To examine my thoughts and actions and consider whether they grow out of a relationship with Jesus Christ, the One I have called my Savior and Lord. Maybe that's why we speak of our "faith *journey*" and leave its ultimate destination to God.

The good news in this passage hinges on the figure of the gardener, arguing with the vineyard owner on behalf of the unproductive fig tree. The gardener doesn't excuse the tree, just asks for another chance. The gardener doesn't magically produce the figs, but promises to tend it and watch over it faithfully. One more year...have faith! If the gardener represents Jesus, then we know to what extent he made good on his promise. The cross tells us that Hell has already been paid.

Jesus judges us. For us and for our salvation, he won't let us stick to theoretical discussions about why bad things happen to good people, or point the finger of judgment to the obvious

sinners around us. He wants to keep the focus on us, you and me, and where we stand, what good we bring out of our lives, how we bless the universe by producing fruits of goodness, compassion, generosity, and love.

This is gospel, this is *good* news?? Well, think about the judgments that save your life. The good news of a healthy life might begin with the bad news of artery blockage and heart surgery. The good news of a sense of well being and purpose might begin with the bad news of feeling your emptiness and dread. The good news of a united community might begin with the bad news of unresolved issues, fractured friendships, unspoken pain. The good news of a restored and reconciled relationship with God begins with the bad news that our sin separates us from the very One who loves us and wants to heal us. Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted, “The sole ground of all peace still remains the forgiveness of sins.”

Our text ends with the gardener’s promise of continued care and nurture. We don’t know whether or not the fig tree “repented”—changed and started growing figs. Maybe Jesus told it that way to toss the ball back to us. Even in a complicated and chaotic world, your actions do count. Your choices matter. Let your first and last one be for God. It’s true, you may still fall, but then you’ll know Whose arms will catch you.

TO JESUS WHO LOVES US, AND FREED US BY HIS CROSS, AND
MAKES US TO BE A KINGDOM, TO HIM BY POWER AND GLORY
FOREVER. AMEN.

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