

“Digging in the Dirt”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Smith
At Hancock United Church of Christ in Lexington, MA
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The Lesson: Luke 13:1-9

200 people killed in train explosions in Madrid.
9 U.S. Soldiers killed in the last four days.
Gay Rights Advocates Left Waiting To Hear.

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight O God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

There was a New Yorker cartoon awhile back that showed a giant, house sized, New York Times flying through the air and about to crush this little man standing sheepishly at his doorstep. Do you ever know the feeling when you read the morning headlines? While it doesn't hit me so hard everyday, I find that I've been feeling more and more overwhelmed by recent news. This last week has been no exception.

Our scripture passage today starts off with a group of Jesus' followers telling with him about some recent headlines albeit from first century Jerusalem. To be clear, the tragedies of which they speak are decidedly not tragedies of Biblical proportions. They've heard of the misfortune of a few Galileans who were killed in a scuffle with Pilate's soldiers at the Temple in Jerusalem. They talk about a tower's collapse that claimed 18 lives. A piece of the conversation may well have included some speculation over what these poor folks did to deserve such tragic fates. In the ancient Jewish mindset, painful experiences like these were routinely seen as signs of God's judgment. Not surprisingly, Jesus has something to say about this. He asks: "Do you really think that the Galileans suffered because they were worse sinners than other Galileans? Do you really believe that those killed at the Tower were worse offenders than anyone else who had been in Jerusalem that day?"

At least 200 people died in Madrid this week. Fortunately, most of us are spiritually mature enough not to ask the question, 'do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in, or traveling through, Madrid?' We hear the first part of our passage from Luke

this morning and we are quick to dismiss it. We think we know better. We think we've moved beyond this archaic 'blaming the victim' mindset especially when it comes to things like genuine accidents, or terrorist attacks, or even the vast amount of suffering caused by the Enron scandal. And yet . . . who among us has not heard our hearts cry out upon hearing the news: "But these people were innocent!" "They did not deserve this tragedy." As we ponder headlines, the tapes may even start running in the backs of our minds without our knowing it: They were "good Americans", "good Christians," "good soldiers." "They were hard working people." When tragedy strikes, we so often feel this impulse to elevate the moral life of those who suffer, do we not? We may think we have moved beyond judging victims of tragedy, but when we call victims innocent or good, we are still placement judgment. I suppose there is something natural and human about this response to tragic news. It inevitably brings to mind that best selling question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

When we read between the lines of the first part of our passage, Jesus responds with a different question, and one that is decidedly more aggressive. He more or less says to them "Set aside the 'bad things' for a moment . . . where do you get this idea of 'good people' or 'bad people'?" When he raises the rhetorical question, 'did they suffer because they were worse sinners', Jesus fires off a categorical "No!" Their sin, *or lack thereof*, has nothing to do with their suffering. A merciful and loving God does not punish us with random acts of death and violence. Jesus then delivers an even more aggressive, and indeed confounding, statement: "But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Can't you just hear his followers muttering to themselves "Jesus . . . where did that come from. We were just casually kicking around some current events a second ago. Repent? Who, us? Lighten up, man."

I heard a newscast on Friday that cited one of the signs held by a mourner standing at a vigil outside the train station at Madrid. The sign read: "We were all on the same train." In my mind, this sentiment expresses at least a part of what Jesus is getting at in this first part of our passage. We are all on the same train! There is no reason in God's logic why tragedies should befall some of us but not all of us. There is no reason why some should bear more tragedy more than others do. How much we sin, or how well we sin, is not the question. How much we suffer, or how well we bear it, is not even the question. How much we acknowledge that we are all equals in God's eyes is. The sign was not merely saying that it could have happened to any one of us. The sign said it did happen to every one of us. There are no distinctions being drawn that would say some people are more or less deserving of suffering than others. In a very real way, we are all on the same train. We are all going to suffer loss and tragedy and death, eventually. Jesus answer to the question of why bad things happen to good people could well be, "what do you mean good people?" "No one is good but God alone." As for the rest of us, he says, "all aboard!" Now, before the skeptics in our midst start asking what's the point of being religious or being moral if nobody can be good and if we're just going to die anyway, let's hear Jesus out, shall we? It so happens that Jesus does lighten things up at least enough to give us a little parable.

Jesus shifts gears in the second part of the passage and puts a new spin on the old vineyard metaphor. He tells a story about a vineyard owner who notices a fruitless fig tree on his land. "See here" the man says, "For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree and still find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" But the gardener, a.k.a. God,

says “give it one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, if not, cut it down.” Though it’s tempting to joke about what kind of hi-test manure God may have in store for our gardens, we’d be missing a key point of this parable, namely, that God is patient. In the typical cycle of a fig tree that produces fruit 10 out of every 12 months, three years is a long time to wait. Yet God says, give it “one more year” before you cut it down. Alas some good news, amidst all of this scary talk about repenting and perishing. Not only will God will give us a year, but also you’ll notice, the good Gardener is even willing to get dirty by digging in at the very roots of our souls. The question is: Are we?

The parable spared our thinking about repentance for a moment, but its time to return to it. Indeed a proper understanding of repentance is the key to making sense of this passage. Repentance *is* one of those scary words, isn’t it? It doesn’t need to be. Repentance is not about making amends for particular wrong doings, or about 50 lashes with the wet noodle. In the Hebrew, the word for repentance, *teshuva*, literally means a “turning back”. It’s partnered with an understanding of sin as separation from God and from one another. When we have chosen to turn away from God, to keep ourselves separate from God, we find ourselves walking away from God in thought, word and action. Our repentance comes then whenever we can turn ourselves around and turn back towards God. So, when Jesus says “repent or perish,” he is saying, in essence, turn your lives towards the living God, the very ground of our being, or you will not know what life really is!

The parable about the dying fig tree is ultimately a parable about our repentance and God’s mercy, and the two go hand in hand. When we have turned away from God, or from ourselves or from one another, we lose touch with that living ground of our being. We become closed off, and emotionally numb to suffering and joy (skeptics take note). Eventually, we wither, our spirits will die and we will no longer bear the much-needed fruit of God’s mercy in our world. Future generations of vineyard workers will begin to lose the seeds from which to grow their own fruits. With the right amount of patience however, and when we can let God’s spade dig around in our hearts - when we find ourselves moved to tears or to some other vulnerable place - we will find ourselves slowly but surely turning from separation to connection, from individualism to community, from isolation to intimacy. In case you missed my earlier edition, the good news is that Jesus not only tells us that God will give us one more year to try turning ourselves around, but God will even do some of that digging and fertilizing.

For most of us, the problem with this picture is that we prefer to tend to our own gardens, to pick our own fertilizer, to dig where we think it’s needed. We don’t like others messing around in our backyards, and most especially not God. Standing amidst soils that are saturated in self-determination and self-improvement, we may find ourselves bearing a certain kind of fruit – say the fruits of our own success and self-gratification. This is not the fruit of which our passage speaks, nor is it the garden. Self-determination, self-improvement, self-gratification ultimately leaves us standing isolated on our parcels with little in the way of moral accountability. You do it your way. I’ll do it my way. And let’s keep the fruit to ourselves. Its something like this mentality that makes us feel like we can distance ourselves from victims of tragedies by saying they are more or less deserving. When we truly realize that there is no more or less deserving, that we are all equally vulnerable no matter what our sins, we just might be ready to step out of our individual garden’s into God’s garden. The church stands to remind us that the soil, and the

garden is not ours alone. God's garden is more like a community garden where we come to grow together, where we mix our soils and turn each of our individual purposes, into a common purpose. The church is that place where we find common ground amidst our differences, and where we find that very common ground of our being which is God. The question remains: Are we ready to let God mess with "our" gardens? Are we ready, say, to let God throw some dung from an outhouse in Appalachia into our soil? Are we ready to look for ways that God might be trying to tell us something, not just about our broken world but about ourselves, when we hear tragic news of a tower falling or of people dying in political scuffles?

James Forbes, the senior minister at Riverside Church in New York City once said that 'God does not will everything, but God wills something in everything.' When we read headlines that touch us deeply, that move us to tears, or anger, or that push us down the why-do-bad-things happen-to-good-people road, we would do well to wonder if God is digging around in the dirt of our lives. With each gut-wrenching headline, we can choose to believe that God is distant, that God no longer cares, or worse that God is punishing victims of tragic of nightclub fires, or of terrorist explosions, or of anti-gay discrimination and violence. This past Thursday afternoon, it became abundantly clear to me that this latter choice is alive and well. Standing with some of you on the statehouse steps awaiting news of whether or not the legislature was going to amend discrimination into the state constitution, I saw a sign that read "G.A.Y. God Abhors You." We can choose the ways of hatred and judgment, or of cynicism and despair. Or, we can see that when tragedy strikes one of God's children, it strikes us all. We can hold up a different sort of sign that acknowledges, we are all on the same train, and there are no first and second-class compartments. We can let God dig into our hearts, and even on occasion, let the tears flow when we hear tragic news. I've begun to think for myself that if I don't have a good cry in the shower after reading the lines, at least once every few weeks, I may not be human. The current state of this country, how far we have turned away from God's loving ways, how appallingly silent our more progressive church have been, I'm telling you, its plenty to make a big manly guy like me cry like a baby.

And yet . . . and yet, God is patient. God is not as quick as we are to lose hope, and to cut things down. There are days when I wonder if the mainline Protestant church is a sinking ship. There are days when I say, "just cut it down, God, there is no fruit here." Not many days, mind you, but there are a few. And then, God will throw some fertilizer to Hancock community garden, and say "here, see if you can make this care giving ministry grow into fruits of mercy." "See if you can make this housing initiative grow." "Just wait 'til you hear the fruits of God's mercy ringing through the bells and voices of Hancock choirs." "I'll give you one more year. . . . one more year!" Fortunately for us, Jesus is unclear in his parable about whether this is one more year on our watches on God's watch.

The next time you feel crushed by the weight of that giant New York Times, check the soil on which you are standing, and check what kind of fruit you've been bearing lately. Amazingly enough, the most hopeful, the least despairing people I know are the ones who take time to work in the trenches, to let God dig in the dirt of their of our lives. The most hopeful people I know are ones who are letting God help them to cultivate some community garden, be it at a church or elsewhere. When you feel like God isn't caring, ask what you are doing to contribute to the blood, sweat and tears required to share the work of tending God's garden. Ask

if you are letting God dig around in your own hearts. If gardening doesn't work for you as a metaphor, then ask yourself, 'Do you believe that we are all on the same train?' In my mind, that train has destination beyond Madrid. The good news of our faith assures us that the bad news that happen to good people, and the bad news that happen to bad people, is never the last news. God is willing us to give us one more year to turn it around. God is always ready when we are to dig into our lives and our world, and to let the fruits of justice and mercy blossom in our lives. This Lent, this spring, may we bear these fruits of God's love, for these fruits have the power to conquer even death. Amen.