

Third Sunday of Lent – February 28, 2016

Many pious people of Jesus' time assumed that tragedy and violence were divine punishments for sin. That's how people read bad events, even when these events happened to seemingly innocent people. Why do bad things happen to good people? God was punishing them for their sins. Right, Jesus?

Notice that Jesus is not interested in playing such mind games. Instead, as he usually does, Jesus reframes the discussion. He's quite good at this.

While the crowd was fixated on accusations of sin, Jesus was calling for people to bear fruit. While the crowd assumed that God was on the watch for wrongdoing, Jesus spoke in the name of the God of Moses, a God who seeks friends to put divine mercy into practice. While the crowd focused on sins committed, Jesus focused on uncultivated potential.

We might reflect today on what we believe about God and how our daily activities reflect that belief. We are invited to think about how we interpret the events of our own day and we're warned against our often too facile judgments. Even more importantly, we're called to notice how God wants to draw our attention to the world's need for the fruits of mercy.

Enter the parable of the barren fig tree. If God waits on us, is patient with us, and gives us time to bear fruit (and God does!), it is also appropriate for us to learn better how to wait on God. Maybe we might need some work on our own patient waiting.

The Scriptures are full of stories of desert emptiness being filled with divine abundance, but only in God's good time. Deserts bloom but only after years of exile, barren wombs bring forth new life though it only be in old age, blind folks do come to see, mere youths slay ever-so-big giants, and the dead do find life though only after dying. All this and more in God's good time. Not ours.

So, if the parable of the fig tree is God's story about us, it is also our story about the God we believe in. We don't have any control over God's good time, so we must be filled with patient and fruitful endurance. We do have a lot of control over our own good time, so we are called right now to bear some fruit, fruit that will last.

The will of God that is beyond debate is that we change and produce fruit, that we bring heaven to earth. I read recently of a very successful business leader who had died. His wife was asked if he was a happy man. She replied that he had trouble with happiness because he was almost "physically revolted by the idea of unrealized potential left on the table." There is something of that kind of intensity in Jesus' plea for repentance.