

Year C, Advent 3
March 24th, 2019
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Luke 13:1-9

Who Owns the Vineyard?

“When the south wind blows, you say, there will be scorching heat; and it happens. When a cloud bank rises in the west, you immediately say, it is going to rain; and it does. You hypocrites! You can interpret the weather but you can’t interpret the present time even though it is as obvious and predictable.” “Hypocrites” refers to people who pay attention to the less important patterns but miss the really big ones that deeply bear on their lives.

The next section appears unrelated but actually provides the key to why they are hypocrites. It begins, “And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right” when you are in dispute with your neighbor. No, instead you each want to be declared right by some exterior authority. You want to win against your opponent and so you drag yourselves before the judge who hands you over to the officer and the officer throws you in prison.

Circling back to the issue of hypocrisy, do we fail to read the signs of the times because our desire to win or fear of losing blinds us? We get so focused on getting ahead or falling behind that we lose touch with the bigger picture. Our eyes, centered on our neighbor, fail to notice the real threat coming from another quarter. The real threat is the increasing violence conflict generates for everyone and everything around us.

Jesus says we don’t interpret the times with the same precision as the weather because we desire to win and we fear losing and this causes us to dismiss obvious and critical information. We make winning more important than the truth and the deepest truth is that we are in relation with the whole world as brothers and sisters. The non-recognition of this truth, unchecked, will destroy us. That’s the truth!

Since we live after the resurrection, we can figure this out! We don’t need to put ourselves before a judge, lose control, and find ourselves in prison with huge fines. Isn’t that what war is? It’s a kind of judge where each side brings its case and both sides lose control, find themselves in a hell of their own making with costs far exceeding what they had expected and stretching out far longer than they had ever intended. I cite Afghanistan as a contemporary example. Well, as it turns out, all of this has been preamble to today’s gospel lesson.

“At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” Some Galileans were sacrificing animals on the altar when Pilate had them murdered and their blood mingled with the blood of the animals. Sacrifice is supposed to prevent murder. That’s why they offer it. I do this for you, God, and

you protect me in exchange. And yet these Galileans had been killed in the Temple while in the act of sacrificing.

Did God fail to keep his end of the bargain? That's unthinkable and would be blasphemy so Jesus asks the next obvious question. "Do you think the suffering of these Galileans proves that they were more sinful than all the other Galileans?" Were those Galileans so much more sinful than all other Galileans that not even sacrificing in the temple could save them?

But what if there is no correlation between God and violence. In fact, when we think there is a connection, we make our world violent and that's the world we force ourselves to live in. If it is true there is no connection between God and violence, that God is solely a God of love than "unless we change our hearts and lives, we will die just as they did" for we will be living in the world that we have created; not God—a world of tit-for-tat.

Jesus now brings his own illustration that ups the ante and deals directly with "an act of God" rather than a political act. A tower fell in Jerusalem killing eighteen people. "Do you think they were more guilty of wrongdoing than everyone else who lives in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you change your hearts and lives, you will die just as they did." What does he mean?

The crowd to whom Jesus is speaking thinks they live in a tit-for-tat world where they do their part and God does his part. But in fact they don't live in a tit-for-tat world at all. They live in a world of grace and forgiveness. They must change their hearts and lives to line up with this or they will surely die as the eighteen did; namely, die thinking they failed God or God failed them.

Now Jesus tells a parable. "A man owned a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it and found none. He said to his gardener, 'Look, I've come looking for fruit on this fig tree for the past three years, (an interesting number—the years of Jesus' ministry until the cross?) and I never found any. Cut it down! Why should it continue depleting the soil's nutrients?'"

The owner wants to cut down the fig tree but the gardener says "Lord, give it one more year, and I will dig around it and give it fertilizer. Maybe it will produce fruit next year; if not, then you can cut it down." Remember, this is a parable not a literal story. Parables are highly imaginative and lend themselves to concentrated thought.

I think the gardener is Jesus and his life and this parable are examples of his digging under this fig tree. He is stirring up the soil and preparing it to receive new nourishment for love. It's what we do in Lent. The fig tree is the human species, so different than the rest of God's creation that it is like a fig tree in a vineyard. And like the fig tree, the human species are heavy feeders, needing the new nourishment for love to produce fruit. The new nourishment for love is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. It's the fertilizer that makes fruiting possible. Prior

to the application of this fertilizer the fig tree could not produce fruit. We humans simply can't see, on our own, what the cross reveals to us. On the cross God put himself in the middle of our tit-for-tat world and showed us another way featuring love and forgiveness. If it were a tit-for-tat world, Jesus would have called a legion of Angels and the fig tree would have been cut down right there and then. But he refuses to operate on that basis and instead forgives and provides a way towards peace. Peace is the fruit.

This peace is for the whole world for Jesus knows if we continue to live in a tit-for-tat fashion, we will inevitably destroy ourselves. It's as sure as south wind bringing heat and clouds in the west bringing rain. In the story the gardener adds "Maybe it will produce fruit next year, if not, then you can cut it down." We live in that next year. The fig tree has been fertilized by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We are in the time of waiting to see if we will bear fruit. The fruit will be non-violence, forgiveness, mercy and some suffering thrown in through the transition. Yes, it requires a leap of faith, but I see no other way.

Now we come to the final question. Who owns the vineyard containing the fig tree? We do! We are the owners. If we don't bear the fruit of love, repentance, forgiveness and mercy in our dealings with our neighbor and enemy, the tree will get cut down and we will be the ones who do the cutting. It's as sure as heat drawn up by the south wind and rain coming from the west. We will cut down our own tree because we have produced so little fruit of love and forgiveness even though we have been fertilized by the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Our own tree is the earth we live on and the people who inhabit it. This is the message on this third Sunday of Lent. Amen.