

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

Blizzards, storms, tornados, floods, multiple shootings to say nothing of other forms of violence, seems like every time you turn around, check the internet, or turn on tv news, that something bad has happened somewhere. Sometimes we might think the chickens have all come home to roost and this is the penalty for whatever sin has incurred retribution. Talking heads, pundits, tv preachers will solemnly intone that whatever has happened somewhere is because we have allowed, smiled at, maybe even done something that God considers evil. Next time you hear that a hurricane has hit a coastal area, or a tornado has devastated a countryside somewhere in America and it is a case of divine retribution, make a solemn vow to never again watch or listen to whoever has made such a statement.

Now I know that in the first section of our gospel this morning, Jesus says: "unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." But before we jump to conclusions, let's look at this paragraph in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. Some bad things have happened to some people, in part because of the actions of Pontius Pilate, in part because the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus flat out tells us these things did not happen because "they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem." Jesus' reply to those questioning him about these two events doesn't deny the consequences of sin, nor does he deny that sin leads to judgment, but he is saying that those who encounter a calamity of some sort, man-made or otherwise, haven't necessarily been marked by God as being more deserving of such a thing than those who do not.

Now I don't watch tv, but every now and then I'll walk through a room where tv is on, maybe in a hospital room, and I'll hear something like "while supplies last" or "the sale of the century is almost over," or "lowest prices of the year." All these make me smile because the year and the century are still young, and have you ever heard of anyone running out of something that is on sale? It's kind of like the "going out of business" sales that apparently can last years in the same location. For most of us, it goes in one ear and out the other although some folks must respond because it costs money to run those ads.

In one ear and out the other, often the case, at least that's what I often seemed to hear when I was growing up, usually from my parents, but occasionally from teachers and others. I suppose it might have seemed that way at times, but that really wasn't the case. Now I hear Jesus saying "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." It's a message that sunk in a long time ago. To repent, to turn around and go the other way in Hebrew understanding, to accept being found in the understanding of middle-eastern Christians for the past two thousand years. To try and live in a way that is pleasing to God, not to earn salvation, not to keep it, not to avoid retribution from God, or even to avoid catching his attention, but because I want to please God as best I can considering I am a sinful, albeit saved, believer. God is not in the retribution business but in the mercy business, there is no reward/punishment theology, or a pavlovian conditioned response to certain

stimuli, everything does not happen for a reason. We will, all of us, die as did those whose blood was mingled with their sacrifices by Pilate, as did those who were killed when the tower collapsed. However, we will not perish through eternal separation from Jesus.

But now, consider that Jesus is still talking to us, misfortune in the form of illness, accident, human action or inaction, freak of nature, whatever, can happen to us at any time. But not because we deserve it.

As I pondered this text I remembered an apple tree that we had in our back yard in a house we lived in when my parents moved to Austin so many years ago. We had two good sized trees in our back yard, one was excellent for climbing. The second was an apple tree, an old tree, it had been hit by lightning sometime before we moved in, it had caught fire and the trunk was hollowed for a much of its length. When we moved in I saw that tree I was sure it was dead. I was wrong because as summer approached, buds came out, then leaves, eventually flowers, then apples. Lots of apples, green apples that would, if left on the tree, actually get streaks of red. The apples were big, and they were good. Who would have ever thought that such a tree could produce so much fruit.

This little anecdote was sparked by my thinking about Jesus' parable of the barren fig tree, a story that one of my favorite authors, Fred Craddock, has called the "parable of divine patience." You and I are saved because we believe, we believe entirely through the grace of God, saved by grace through faith as you have heard repeatedly over the years. Our salvation is not because of anything we have done or even can do, our salvation is undeserved, unmerited, unearned, it is the unconditional love of God at work. And now we try and live in a way that is pleasing to God, that produces fruit.

And by the grace of God brothers and sisters, we can and do produce some fruit, oh we may plant and fertilize and tend and nourish, but God gives the growth, and we continue to produce fruit. Maybe it's small, filled with seeds, but nonetheless it is fruit, and all of it is to further the kingdom of God, for God's praise, to glorify him. And now is the time for one of those exceptional harvests, a harvest of truly exceptional fruit, now is the time to praise our God, our God who gives us salvation, now is the time to pray for God to use us to be what he would have us be. Now is the time to be about the business of producing fruit in our giving, our service to others, now is the time for our witness of what it means to be the fruit of the kingdom.

AMEN