

In this week's Gospel passage, Jesus is ushering in a new way. He is approached with an account of violence, one that – to make matters worse – violates the purity of the ritual worship. “Their blood mingled with their sacrifice,” complains the crowd.

Likely, they were expecting Jesus to re-affirm the old way. Either, he would have commented upon the ritual offense of blood being mingled with their sacrifices, or he would have commented on the tragedy itself, and what had caused such a tragedy to occur. Had he done so, he would have supported centuries of thinking, thinking that goes something like this: Bad things happen when God is angry, and God is angry when we sin. Therefore, bad things happen to us as punishment when we sin.

Furthermore, ritual worship of this God has exact and precise rules, and a slight violation of these rules not only nullifies the sacrifice, but turns us into sinners who will receive punishment. There are examples of this thinking throughout the Old Testament. In Leviticus, for example, we are told that God slays Aaron's sons for offering a sacrifice that God did not want.

The old way of seeing God presented God as exacting; clear but demanding, and mercilessly just.

The new way of seeing things offers something entirely different:

First, Jesus collapses the whole equation: calamity is not the result of sin. “Are they worse sinners than you?” he asks the crowd. The implication, of course, is No, they were not. You are no better than all of those whom tragedy befell, he tells them. Thus does Jesus masterfully undo the traditional equation between sin and disaster.

Jesus uses the accounts of the slaughtered Galileans and the fallen tower of Siloam as an opportunity to illustrate the failure in this old world view of judgment theology to describe our relationship with God. When bad things happen to others, it's natural to wonder why we escape while others do not. At times we may even be tempted to congratulate ourselves for our own well-being. As if we are fortunate because somehow we've earned it all ourselves.

At the same time, the opposite can happen as well. When difficulties befall us, we may ask: why me? Is God somehow punishing me for something I did? In the Gospel story this morning, Jesus moves us away from these individualistic explanations. Those who died, whether it be at Pilate's hands or from the falling tower, were no worse sinners than anyone else. And, though they may not have caused their own deaths, Jesus tells the crowd, those who do not repent and turn toward God will bring judgment upon themselves.

One commentator uses the early experiences of those with HIV/AIDS in the gay community as a contemporary example to illustrate the potentially disastrous consequences of continuing to buy into this old judgment theology. *“In the early years, when the disease wreaked havoc on communities of gay men, religious fundamentalists claimed that AIDS was God's gift to rid the world of the evil of homosexuality. The cloud of that judgment theology was oppressive and death-dealing to the self-esteem and spiritual well-being of many LGBT people. Yet we know that HIV/AIDS was and is no more God's judgment against homosexuality for gay people than it is God's judgment against heterosexuality for the straight people who are infected and affected by it. Yet the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS and its link with this judgment theology was so prevalent that [some historians believe] it kept the United States government from even mentioning the word "AIDS" until well past the time that the disease should have been aggressively fought and compassionately treated. Jesus implies what we know is true: blaming the victim never helps anyone, and more often than not, it provides empty excuses to withhold compassionate service to those who suffer.”*¹

¹ Quotes in italics credited to HRC's Scripture Commentary for Lent 3, Year C; author unspecified. Bracketed “some historians believe” is my addition.

Of course we don't have to go back to the early stages of the AIDS crisis to find examples of this old theology rearing its ugly head. In this very decade there have been a number of so called ministers of the Gospel, that have claimed that the tragedies of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Haitian earthquake, are God's punishment for certain human behaviors. In our story today, however, Jesus argues strongly against this idea that calamity is a sign of God's judgment, calling ALL people to repent, and *"to turn away from a culture of violence, retribution and scapegoating."*

With the parable of the fig tree, Jesus introduces the notion of mercy into the crowds' worldview. In the old world view, God's justice reigned supreme. Here, Jesus is offering them a parable that speaks to God's patience. "Give me a year," the gardener pleads. And a year not simply to watch and wait, but a year to tend more carefully, a year to fertilize and water.

God can cut down whenever God wishes. But God waits, mercifully, for people to bear more fruit. Jesus does not simply undo an old structure for understanding God, though. Provocatively, he offers a new one. If the dominant dynamic between humans and God had been sin and harm, Jesus replaces it with the more hopeful dynamic of fruitfulness and mercy. He ushers them away from a negative worldview to a positive one. In this worldview, God wants us not simply to avoid sin but to go beyond that, to bear fruit, "fruit that will last," Jesus says in John's Gospel. All of the energy that previously went into a meticulous, scrupulous avoidance of actions that would bring God's wrath can now be channeled into fruitfulness, into acts of love, compassion, forgiveness and mercy. And in this world, God does not merely sit by, waiting to pounce on our misdeeds. Rather, the God of Jesus is working with us, laboring to fertilize us, putting all of God's energy into making us a people who bear fruit.

This passage is classically Lenten. By capturing a moment when the new ushered out the old, it reminds us that we too fall into theological traps. Too often, we define Lent by committing ourselves to the avoidance of sinful behavior. Many Lenten promises are phrased in the negative. "No more chocolate, no more beer." And while those promises can actually be very fruitful, it is proactive fruitfulness to which we are called. If the avoidance of a bad habit will bear fruit, then go for it, but this passage is reminding us, we are called to act toward fruitfulness. And to be most fruitful, this passage is saying, requires us to give up something, for sure, but not something on the usual list: and that is, the judgment of others.

The word "repentance" tries to capture this movement from old to new. Throughout the centuries, it has taken on deep moralizing tones. Its original meaning, however, was stripped of them. *Metanoia*, the Greek word from which it comes, is a kind of conversion, a literal "going beyond" our mind's usual way of seeing things.

The two parts of this Gospel – the peoples' complaint and Jesus' parable – encapsulate Jesus' mission. Not content merely to condemn their way of seeing things, Jesus offers them something new, something better. He offers them a God whose justice is merciful, whose care is constant, and whose desire for us meets our deepest desire for ourselves: to be fruitful.

Let this passage call us into fruitfulness these weeks of lent. Aware of our sacred position as trees in God's own vineyard, let us reach deep into the fertilizer of God's nourishing love, and do the simplest thing there is: spread it around.