

St. Bartholomew

3rd Sunday in Lent

March 7, 2010

Luke 13:1-9

In our gospel reading, we are reminded that most people in Jesus' day believed in a cause and effect relationship between sin, and suffering. That is, if you had problems or if you had some tragedy happen in your life - it must be because you have done something wrong.

You can see this in the old story of Job - where his friends come to Job and say - man, you must have done something terribly wrong to deserve these tragedies. Just admit it. But Job says, "No I have done nothing to deserve this." And, at the end of the story, God speaks out of the whirlwind and says that "No Job did not deserve these trials - they were simply a test of his faith."

And in the Gospel of John, Jesus and the disciples encounter a man born blind and the disciples ask Jesus - "Who sinned that this man was born blind, this man or his parents?" But Jesus answers, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned. He was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

In today's gospel reading, Jesus points out two places where people have died sudden and tragic deaths. And Jesus says, "Do you think these people were greater sinners than all of the rest of you! No! But if you don't repent - if you don't

completely change the way that you are thinking - you will die just as condemned."

You see, they lived in a system of judgment. Everybody was judging everybody - and everybody was condemning everybody for the suffering that they had in their life. For instance, if your roof caved in from a heavy snow - it must mean that you had done something terribly wrong. Your neighbors would have thought this - and you would have thought this. "What did I do wrong to cause this tragedy?"

Or if you had some physical ailment - maybe you were born with one leg shorter than another - or your child was born with some mental deficiency. You would constantly live with the understanding that God had cursed you or your child for some reason - and everyone would have believed that.

But Jesus says, "No!" That system of thinking is totally wrong. You have created a world, and a life, and a society filled with condemnation. Everyone condemning everyone - even yourself!

So Jesus says, "Unless you repent. Unless you completely change the way that you're thinking - you will always live and eventually die in that system of condemnation and self-condemnation."

Now the word for "repentance" or "To repent" literally means to turn around. To completely reverse your direction.

Often times people think of this to mean that you should change your bad actions into good actions. But here, Jesus is talking about your way of thinking. To completely turn around your way of judging and condemning people.

So let's look at the words "Judging" and "Condemning". What words would be exactly opposite of Judging and Condemning? Maybe the words "Forgiving" and "Understanding" might work. Instead of being judging and condemning when you hear of an illness or tragedy - Maybe Jesus means you should be forgiving and understanding.

Now, this isn't easy. Our natural human disposition is to blame people for their suffering. We quite naturally blame the alcoholic for destroying their life - even though we have been told that alcoholism is a disease. We quite naturally blame the people of New Orleans for building below sea level - even though poor people really don't have much of an option where they build their houses. Some people quite naturally blame the people of Haiti for their massive destruction and loss of 200,000 lives.

And yet, Jesus says "No". Stop judging. Stop condemning. Learn to live in a completely new way of thinking - and new way of being. Learn to simply care. Learn to simply love - when you see suffering and tragedy.

You know each of us has things in our lives - or have gone through things in our lives that you might feel is a curse or

condemnation from God. You might have been born with some physical ailment. You might have lost your job - or had your hours painfully cut back. You might suffer from back problems, from migraines. You might have had an accident or be dealing with difficult family issues.

And you might have a tendency to want to blame God - to want to ask "Why me?!" That's a natural reaction. And yet, Jesus says, "No". That is the old way of thinking. That is the way of judging and condemning.

It was interesting the other night at the Casserole Club discussion. We were talking about all of the reasons why different tragedies happen - whether they were your own fault through bad decisions - or whether they were simply natural forces - and does God make or allow that to happen? And we started getting into this whole system of asking "Why these things happen."

And one person had a powerful spiritual insight that I have never heard before. They said, "Aren't we just getting back into that whole judging thing again?" "When we are tempted to start asking "Why" - aren't we trying to blame someone or something? Instead of asking "Why?", we should simply ask, "How can I help?""

Another person said, "Instead of asking "Why", we should just trust that God is going to get you through - or trust that

God loves you in spite of the pain and challenges that you are going through." Just trust. Just help. Just care. Just love. Just act - have mercy. Just serve and bring healing and hope.

Just trust. Period. And you know, that would certainly push your faith. That would certainly challenge your spirit and your faith - to be able to turn from the troubles and the forces of this world and simply say, "I trust You God. No matter what comes - be with me."

Now THAT would be a powerful faith. THAT would making God the center of your being in spite of all else.

I believe that is the attitude and the life that Jesus is calling you and me to. To repent of always judging each other - identifying each other's faults and failings. And instead just loving each other - forgiving each other. Overlooking each other's faults. Just caring for people regardless of what trouble they are in or are going through. Even those poor drug addicts - even those people don't seem to be measuring up to your standards. Even those people who feel different from you politically.

To truly give up judging - or at least trying to. What a peaceful and loving and graceful way to be. You might recognize how a person is different from you... You might see their faults... But then you just love them anyway. What a peaceful

and loving and graceful way to be. May God fill your life -
fill your heart and mind and spirit with that peacefulness and
that grace - so that your life and your attitude may grow
abundant and loving fruit always.

Amen