

Lent 3, 2016
Repentance
The Rev. Sue Sommer

You may have seen the cartoon in the New Yorker which has been making the rounds on Facebook. It depicts two people. One says to the other, “My desire to be well informed currently is conflicting with my desire to stay sane.” Perhaps some of us can relate, not only in this crazy election year, but with respect to news in general. If we already are feeling a bit anxious, there’s very little on CNN or MSNBC that is going to lift us out of that place. Our plugged-in lives make us susceptible to a state of chronic anxiety, but that state of mind is not really a new phenomenon. News traveled fast in first century Israel as well. Some of the people traveling with Jesus to Jerusalem had heard about how Pilate had murdered some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices in the Temple, and then added insult to injury by desecrating their bodies and their sacrificial offerings. In other news, some innocent bystanders were killed when a towering wall fell on them. We can almost imagine some news commentator saying, “Now here’s Jesus of Nazareth with an analysis of today’s events. Over to you Jesus.”

Then, as now, people wanted a measure of comfort, of good news. The closer to the bone bad news hits us, the more we seek reassurance in one form or another. Luke doesn’t spell it out, but I suspect that some in the crowd certainly would have expected Jesus to offer the analysis that would have come straight out of Deuteronomy. Some, at least, probably wanted him to draw a straight line between a person’s sinfulness and their suffering. Certainly a common way of reconciling belief in a loving God with clear evidence of suffering in the world was to see suffering as the divine punishment for sin. *You get what you deserve and you deserve what you get* was one way by which theological meaning was made. And it doesn’t take much imagination to see why this was a popular theology then (and now, frankly). It offered a sense of spurious comfort to those who were not, at present, suffering. It gave the illusion of control over one’s destiny. (Don’t want to suffer? Easy, just keep all the rules and you’ll be fine.) It also conveniently let people off the hook with respect to reaching out to people who were suffering. After all, if suffering were how God balanced our misdeeds, who are we to tip those scales of justice?

So I imagine that some people were eager to hear Jesus utter that particular party line. But it didn’t quite go that way, did it? He refused to blame the victims for their tragic misfortune. He also he refused to speculate on the deep secrets of the universe; he gave no explanation for why a loving God doesn’t prevent or all the world’s pain and injustice. What he did was to acknowledge that our existence is fragile. What he did was to use these two tragedies as a springboard for urgent teaching about repentance.

Now I know what you may be thinking where you hear the word, “repentance.” Blah blah sinful, feel remorseful, promise not to do it again, amend your life. We hear “repentance” and immediately go to “behavior” and “guilt.” We Christians have interpreted sin in profoundly personal terms ever since the Reformation. But the repentance that Jesus summons us to is really, fundamentally, about how we perceive reality. As one writer¹ put it, repentance implies *an utter reconfiguration of your perspective on reality and meaning, including a reorientation of yourself toward God*. Your behavior might change as a result of this new perception, certainly; but repentance first involves seeing things differently and coming to a new understanding of what God makes possible. Jesus, then, is promising an alternate perspective on the cycles of violence, pain and

¹ Matthew Skinner, *How to Survive the Sequester, Syria, and other Threatening Headlines*, Huffingtonpost Religion, April 29, 2013.

meaninglessness. To miss out on this way of seeing -- to neglect to "repent" -- is to miss out on other dimensions of our existence. It is to pass by one's purpose. To be, in other words, the fruitless fig tree.

You'll notice in all of this that Jesus does not blow smoke up our skirts here. He's promising us no rose gardens, no lives free from trauma in exchange for belief in him. Bad stuff is gonna continue to happen. But what he does do is to lead us to a place of trust and hope that calamity is evidence neither of God's punishment nor his absence, and that there is more -- far more -- to any tragic story than simply tragedy. By the same token, his call to repent is neither escapism nor denial. The repentance that Jesus teaches names the change that occurs within us when God meets us and reshapes our understanding. (We'll hear more about that in next week's gospel.)

And when that doesn't happen...we don't repent...when we fail to live into our purpose and find ourselves to be fruitless fig trees, trapped in a way of apprehending reality that fails to see the hope that God brings, God does not give up on us. That's the point of that little parable. The *capacity* to repent -- to see things differently -- comes to us as *his* gracious gift. Against all odds, the compacted soil around our hearts gets loosened. We are nourished and supported, not abandoned.

To quote the great thinker, Yogi Berra, it ain't over till it's over. But the thing is, none of us knows when that will be for each of us. Life is short, and how we spend the life we have matters in this world. The urgency with which Jesus calls us to discover God as the source of sustenance, belonging, meaning and hope in our world is his gift to us as he travels to Jerusalem. Let's don't squander that gift.