

“When Bad Things Happen to Good People”

Luke 13:1-5;

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All week long, the news has been dominated by the latest updates coming out of South Florida, from the site of that terrible building disaster. Thus far, only twenty bodies have been recovered while over a hundred and thirty are still missing. Some people continue to hope for a miracle believing that their loved ones may yet be surviving under all that rubble, but most by now are more realistic about their fate. During television interviews, I’ve witnessed many expressions of faith. There are those persons who have looked to God for the first time in years while there are others who claim to feel our Lord’s spiritual arms gently enfolding them, holding them ever more tightly. It looks like structural failure may have been the cause but there will be time to impute blame later. For now, there are hundreds of friends and family members who are struggling with deep loss, persons who wake up each morning with a huge hole in their heart.

Like this current tragedy, our text this morning ALSO involves the collapse of an existing structure leading to a great loss of life. Jesus had been teaching before an overflow crowd when several members of the audience raised a theological question concerning the state of suffering in the world. They wanted to understand the ROOT CAUSE of suffering, whether it was the result of sin in one’s life and thus a form of divine punishment as the Jews had taught for centuries, or that tragedy and pain come to ALL people REGARDLESS of how good or bad they may be, that misfortune is an inherent part of life itself and NOT tied to the state of one’s heart and conduct.

If the rabbis were correct, then those with the GREATEST tragedy and suffering in their lives were receiving their due for all the depravity and immorality they practiced, whether openly or in secret. But what about those who lived PERFECTLY GOOD AND RIGHTEOUS lives and yet were the victims of unbearable pain and misfortune as so often happens- it would then CONTRADICT such teaching. Thus, those inquirers were looking for Jesus to explain why BAD THINGS often happen to GOOD PEOPLE, while on the OTHER hand, many BAD PEOPLE will often lead CHARMED LIVES. In making their case, they refer to a recent act where the soldiers of Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor over the region, had murdered some Galileans while they were in the act of worship. Those killed were GOOD AND RIGHTEOUS PERSONS and yet they were needlessly slaughtered while in the process of offering God their heart-felt praise and devotion. They certainly had done nothing bad to WARRANT such a fate as they received!

Well Jesus rejects out of hand the assertion that all suffering was directly the result of sin in one’s life and he responds by referring to ANOTHER recent event- the eighteen victims killed when the tower of Siloam collapsed upon them. These deaths were not in any way related to their sinfulness. He then diverted their focus to the state of their OWN souls:

*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”(Luke 13:2-5)*

Rather than refer to third-party examples, Jesus wanted them to think about their OWN behavior and their OWN fate: EVERYBODY is in need of repentance and it must always begin with ONESELF first.

Bluntly put, Jesus's explanation is that "crap happens." Death can come unexpectedly to ANYONE, IRRESPECTIVE of how righteous or sinful they may be. Although appalling people often meet with unpleasant ends, the fact is that they ALSO are known to die quite peacefully of old age in their own beds while there are many GOOD persons who DO die young. Thus Jesus rejects any correlation between one's conduct and the degree of tragedy and suffering in his life.

The need to understand the nature of good and evil along with the cause of suffering in the world has been both timeless and universal. A century ago, Thornton Wilder in his Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* attempted to settle the question of whether all tragedy that occurs in life is the result of CHANCE, or perhaps may be the result of GOD'S INTERVENTION. Does misfortune and calamity strike because events in life are RANDOM and people just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, or could there be some MYSTERIOUS POWER behind it all--PERHAPS THE WILL OF GOD--and thus be part of some larger divine plan. Set in Lima, Peru in the year 1714, Wilder's book interweaves the stories of five people who die when an ancient rope bridge breaks, plunging them all to their deaths. A Franciscan monk, Brother Juniper, witnesses the accident and spends the rest of his time amassing evidence to explain why God singled out these five to die. By investigating the lives of each of them, the young priest believes he can get into the mind of God and determine why he seems to get involved in human affairs at SOME times and not at OTHERS.

The victims make up a motley cast of characters. There's the Marquesa de Montmayor and her maid, Pepita, who both die when the bridge falls. The Marquesa is an awkward, homely old woman who was forced into an arranged marriage at an early age. At the time of her death, she is estranged from the one person she loves most in the world, her daughter Clara. There is Esteban, whose twin brother had recently died leaving Esteban feeling suicidal. But rather than give up on life, he has decided to "push on" and go to sea and it is for that reason he happens to be on the bridge at the exact moment of its collapse. There is Uncle Pio, who has devoted much of his life to Camila Perichole, the most celebrated actress of her time. In addition to guiding her career, he has been an adventurer, a linguist, a teacher, and an expert on Spanish literature, especially the literature of the theater. He is traveling on the bridge that fateful day with Camila's little son Jaime because he is going to spend a year educating the boy.

For six years, the monk interviewed hundreds of persons and filled scores of notebooks in an effort to prove that the deaths of those individuals were the result of an act of God. In the end, however, he is unable to come to any conclusion about it. A church tribunal eventually declares his work heretical and he and his book are sentenced to be burned in the city square. Wilder never answers his own question but leaves it up to the reader to decide for him or herself.

With the sudden collapse of that condominium building in Surfside, Florida, that same question of "why" is once again pushed to the fore in a very dramatic way. But it also serves as a lesson which forces many people of faith to ask questions like "How could a good God allow such evil to triumph? Could this have actually been part of God's will? Where IS God to be found when such tragedy occurs in life?" On the one hand, there are those who attribute the event to random occurrence or blind chance, that the residents of that building were just plain "unlucky" by being in the wrong place at the wrong time at the very moment its foundation gave

way. Among the stories of some of those killed, one was a student at Vanderbilt University who just happened be there visiting his godfather; while three family members on vacation from Medellin, Columbia, who planned on staying at a relative's condo for only a night or two before continuing with their trip, for some reason arrived a day earlier than planned. But then there are people who believe there is some mysterious and unalterable plan or purpose behind it which we are helpless to do anything about. They conclude that God either intended or permitted that terrible tragedy to happen in the FIRST place. These are the same persons who often say in the wake of a terrible loss, "Everything happens for a reason. It must have been their time to go."

Most of you may recall the great earthquake that struck San Francisco in the fall of 1989. For me, it was quite an emotional event, not only because I had lived there for twelve years prior to that disaster and had experienced quite a few tremblers myself during that time, but I had a number of friends still in the Bay Area who rode out that quake first-hand. The day following that disaster, psychologist Robert Butterworth and Rabbi Harold Kushner--the author of that major bestseller *Why Bad Things Happen to Good People*--were interviewed on CNN by Sonya Friedman. She was seeking ways in which people could find emotional and spiritual strength through that tragedy. When asked by the interviewer, "How does one deal with anxiety in a spiritual way?" this is what the psychologist, said: "It's tough. There's no prescription you can say to keep calm. You can just hope for the best and not do anything rash." All he could offer was an empty and meaningless response to a question many of US have often asked. He suggested that in the face of a tragedy we somehow try to be strong, that we attempt to be stoic and self-controlled, that we look deep within ourselves and simply hope for the best. He offered no hint as to WHERE or HOW we might possibly find that strength when our OWN resources have dried up.

Rabbi Kushner, on the other hand, offered THIS advice:

"I think that it is a time to PRAY. You pray, not necessarily for God to change the results, but you pray for the sense that God is with you, that you will be grateful if the news is good. Or that you will be strong enough to survive it if the news is bad because you know that you're not alone...at times like this, you pray for the sense that God is there at your side, that he has not abandoned you. And whether the news is good or bad, HE WILL BE WITH YOU..."

Rabbi Kushner was right on the mark. When we find ourselves overwhelmed by events and circumstances well beyond our control, that's when we ESPECIALLY need to make God a priority in our lives. We need to look to him in prayer and cast our cares upon the only one who stands ABOVE those circumstances and who can help us through them. But we don't necessarily pray for God TO CHANGE THE RESULTS as WE ASK FOR A SENSE OF HIS NEARNESS, FOR THE ASSURANCE THAT HE IS WITH US. We can be grateful to God if the news is good, but we can ALSO have hope if the news is BAD because we know that in the struggle that lies ahead, we're NOT ALONE- God is there to be with us, to help us through, to strengthen us. He promises he'll never forsake you or me but will walk beside us every step of our life's journey.

Last month, Bob Abernethy passed away at age 93. For forty years, he served as a correspondent for NBC news and for the last twenty, as producer of the popular *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* show on PBS. The grandson of a Baptist minister as well as a graduate of Yale Divinity School, his Christian faith was front and center in his life. Over the years, he had the pleasure of interviewing a number of high profiled individuals but none impressed him more than the former Nobel Peace Prize recipient Desmond Tutu. In his book *The Life of Meaning*:

*Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World*, an anthology of interview transcripts from his PBS program, this is what he said about him:

"I remember interviewing Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and asking him how he begins each day. He spoke of prayer: I HAVE COME TO REALIZE MORE AND MORE THAT PRAYER IS JUST BEING IN THE PRESENCE OF ONE WHO LOVES YOU DEEPLY, WHO LOVES WITH A LOVE THAT WILL NOT LET YOU GO, and so when I get up in the morning I try to spend as much time as I can in the sense of being quiet in the presence of this love. It's like I'm sitting in front of a warm fire on a cold day. I don't have to do anything. All I have to do is be there. And after a while, I may have the qualities of the fire change me so I have the warmth of the fire. I may have the glow of the fire, and it is so also with me and God. I have to be there, quiet."

Further along in the interview, Sonya Friedman asked Rabbi Kushner, "Who does one BLAME for this or other tragedies that strike us?" His response was:

"I think it's very wrong to tell people 'God took your Father or child.' It just teaches people to be angry at God. What people REALLY need is the sense that they're worth caring about. They have in the back of their mind the idea that God hates them. Let them know that you love them as the incarnation of God's love. At a time of loss, people need community, people need to be surrounded by others, to be hugged, hands held, to be listened to...Surround people with love."

Again I applaud the Rabbi's wisdom for not only do we have God as a great resource in our lives, we also have ONE ANOTHER to derive strength from. We need the presence of another human being, the sympathy of a friend, the embrace of a loved one, the open ear of a concerned stranger to help us through life's difficult moments. Through the concern and support of other people, God's love becomes channeled to us in an incarnational manner. If someone asks where is God when we need him most, the answer is that he becomes present to us at that moment in and through the love and care of our neighbor.

Unfortunately, in the days following that earthquake, there were some Christians who looked upon that disaster as God's judgment upon San Francisco's liberal and promiscuous lifestyle- they couldn't have been more wrong. The truth is that that earthquake occurred for GEOLOGICAL, not spiritual reasons. God did not cause the San Andreas fault to shift nor did he desire the three hundred deaths and all the devastation that followed. As I have said repeatedly, I do not believe God wants ANY person to suffer or die but such events happen because that is the nature of our existence. Tragedy, sickness, disease, death all occur because we live in a very dangerous world filled with hatred and greed, with wars and earthquakes, with cancer and car wrecks, and at any moment, we too can be overwhelmed by all of its chaos.

God, on the other hand, is a HEALER and he becomes the only REAL REFUGE from those forces. Though not the CAUSE of the tragedy, he desires to meet us IN THE MIDST OF IT AND IN OUR PAIN with the promise that he will lead us through the danger. God has a way of entering a thoroughly tragic situation and enabling something positive and good to emerge from out of it. When we walk with him, we discover that GOD ALONE is able to sustain a deep serenity, EVEN A JOY in our soul just when the REST of the world is collapsing all around us. This is what Paul referred to as that "peace that passes all understanding," a peace that goes beyond all human reasoning.

Rabbi Kushner continued, speaking to the interviewer of our capacity to grow, to mature through difficult circumstances:

“The philosopher Nietzsche said 'Life breaks us all and we heal stronger in the broken places.' I have found in the majority of people, that once you survive, you come through stronger, that you have discovered something about yourself and the resources that are available to you. But there will be a significant minority of people who will be broken by a tragedy and never get over it. Those are the people who need a whole lot of comforting and handholding. It's simply a matter of, like the buildings in San Francisco, you find out where your stress points are, and if they're in the wrong place, you're liable to shatter.”

Once again he was right. It's an axiom of the spiritual life that the soul matures under various trials. As James--the brother of our Lord and pastor to the Jerusalem church--wrote in the opening verses of his epistle: “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”(James 1:2-4) Under trying circumstances, we learn of our inadequacies, of our own limitations and failures and these direct us away from our own resources to Jesus Christ. It is he who reminds us, "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy burdened for I will give you rest." It is Christ himself who gives us the capacity to rise up from our suffering and our defeats and become much stronger, much wiser persons for it. Still, as the Rabbi said, there will always be a significant number who will be broken by a tragedy and never get over it. I think we all know someone who's lost a child or a spouse and the they've never stopped grieving since. Those are the people who need a whole lot of comforting and handholding, and WE must be the ones to offer that comfort and hold those hands.

Friends, there are things we can all learn from such events, REGARDLESS how terrible they may be. However, it is important to remind ourselves that God is NOT responsible for any of the brokenness and heartache and misfortune that occurs in the world. Rather, God is a HEALER, one who's in the business of TREATING our wounds and HELPING US back onto our feet again. The reality is that we ALL find ourselves living on the edge of a dangerous fault line; we're ALL precariously perched on unstable ground and, at ANY TIME, some unexpected force or circumstance can cause it all to come crashing down upon us. And when it DOES, as it inevitably will, God is right there to be WITH us and FOR us. Furthermore, God will use such moments to remind us of those things that are TRULY important in life and those things that are not, of what things crumble and what endures. He will remind us how there are priorities in life and that they must begin with God and our fellow human beings, that God and people become the greatest resources for surviving and rebuilding our lives following a tragedy. And finally, we are reminded that there are still those who remain crushed after a crisis, but even as others have come to represent the presence of God to us in OUR need, so can WE become the presence of God to someone else in the midst of THEIR OWN pain. Let us pray...

*Merciful Father, it is easy to become jaded and even CYNICAL when we see such tragedy and suffering in the world, and to use it as one more proof that there is no God, that you are nothing more than an empty figment of our imaginations to get us through one crisis after another. No Lord, you are no figment but the most important reality of our lives whom we look to and depend upon for hope and strength during such times. People say you are nothing more than a crutch. Indeed, you ARE a crutch but even a crutch, an arm to lean on, is stronger and more dependable than having NOTHING to get one through life. As you have ministered to us, may WE become a*

*crutch, an arm for OTHERS when they find THEMSELVES alone and devoid of such resources. In this way, they TOO just may experience YOUR LOVE and thus YOUR PRESENCE working through us. In your name we pray. Amen and amen.*