

Luke 13:31-35

There was a time in my life when I exercised a lot. I ran 4 miles 3-4 times per week and swam one mile Monday through Friday. I was pretty proud of myself. I wasn't an Olympic athlete but I felt I wasn't that far away. I would encounter people who didn't exercise and would try to encourage them to do at least a little bit. I would think to myself that I am so glad I am not like that. I could never be like that. But life happens and one knee surgery later, rehab that didn't work that well, a hectic schedule in seminary, a good dose of laziness and I stopped exercising like I used to. In the past couple years, I have gone for months with out doing a thing. Recently, I have made a little bit of a comeback, but it is nowhere near my former heights. I am lucky if I make it to the gym 3 times per week. The other day my doctor was saying I needed to exercise more and began making suggestions. I looked at her and thought –Don't you know who I am? I used to be the exercise queen. I know all about exercise. But then there is that phrase – "used to be." What happened to me I wonder? How did I end up like this? But that's life, isn't it. We end up in places we never thought we would be.

For most of us life does not happen quite as we planned. While we didn't think our life would be perfect, I think many of us thought that the bad things and the not so good things would happen to the other person. But not so – we end up living in places we didn't think we would live, with jobs we never thought we would have. If we are lucky this doesn't set in until somewhere in our 20s. We end up divorced, with cancer, losing a loved one, homeless, losing our job, not exercising. We end up not being the people we wanted to be, not being the people we dreamed we would be? Why we say? Why did this happen to us? What caused this misfortune? Generally we know that it does not have to do with our sins, but we can't help thinking why.

““Why me?” we all cry. “Why do innocent people get hurt in an accident?” “Why do little children get killed in war?” “Why do I get cancer?””ⁱ and that leads right into the questions that are being asked of Jesus in today's gospel - why did bad things happen to people? The people with Jesus tell him about some Galileans who were performing their ritual sacrifice and were killed by Pilate. They are implying that these Galileans were somehow killed because they had done wrong – this was a very popular notion at the time - that your evil deeds would be punished by some disaster. But Jesus calls them out on this belief and says - Do you think that those Galileans suffered because they were worse sinners than all the other sinners – No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Jesus then gives the example of an accident. Remember those eighteen people who were standing there when the tower of Siloam fell on top of them and killed them. Do you think there were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Now it is a relief to hear Jesus says that disaster just happens. It doesn't happen because you have been bad. It is comfort to know that disaster falls upon the bad and the good. As one commentary says, “The comfort is that the people's misfortune is not tied to their behavior or to some perceived lack of righteousness. After all the highest than most any of us get on a 1 to 10 righteousness scale is a shaky 5”ⁱⁱ. Jesus relieves us of our quest to be perfect but then there is that other part that Jesus keeps putting in - that part which is not so much a relief. Jesus says, No I tell you unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. We will perish? We will perish if we don't repent? That doesn't sound so kind and loving. Jesus is saying, disaster falls on the good and bad alike but repent or you will perish just like them. It is a sobering statement.

Then Jesus tells this wonderful parable. It is about a fig tree that has not borne any fruit. The owner of the garden wants to cut it down. He thinks this tree is wasting the soil but the gardener who looks

after the tree says to let it alone for one more year. Let it alone and I will dig around it and put manure on it. I will look after it so it is given every chance to bear fruit. If it does well and good. If it does not, you can cut it down – and here is something I first missed in my reading of the passage.

The gardener does not say that he or she will cut it down. No the gardener says that you - the owner can cut it down. The gardener is not concerned about whether the tree bears fruit – the gardener is concerned about nourishing the tree so that it can bear fruit. The gardener has endless patience doing all that he or she can for the tree. It is the owner that is impatient for the fruit for the harvest. The gardener is like God who has patience beyond what any human can imagine who waits for us – who waits for us to turn away from sin. I see the owner as us or others in the world that are impatient. We want ourselves or others to change. We are impatient for the fruit and the harvest in our lives.

Jesus is telling us 2 things - that if we don't turn to God we will perish – without God, our souls cannot bloom and that God is there patiently waiting for us – nurturing us, providing us opportunity after opportunity to repent and turn to God. It is hard to keep these both in our head. The parable can easily start us thinking about when that year we are given will be up and we will be cut down. But Jesus is there saying, disaster does not befall you because you are sinful. Repent and turn to the Lord. God is waiting patiently. I don't think we know quite what to do with this unconditional love, this unconditional waiting. We don't even have the patience for ourselves.

The same commentary I mentioned before reminds us that “God's world is much more unpredictable than we would have it. The child who society has written off may be the most loving. The poor who have nothing to give may be the most generous. The garden that is the slowest to grow may yield the best harvest.”ⁱⁱⁱ God's ways are not our ways. I have a vision of God looking at the fig tree which has been through a rough time with lots of dead yellow leaves and then seeing the tiniest of shoots on the side and saying look how beautiful that is. I love this tree. It is so amazing. We might want to give up on the tree and throw it out, but God doesn't.

So all you fig trees out there, all you people trying to grow in God's love. Stop trying to figure out where you are on the righteousness scale and don't even try to figure out where anybody else is.

Stop right where you are, repent, and turn to God. Remember that God is always there digging around your roots, putting good rich fertilizer on you, preparing you to bear amazing fruit. Remember that living in God's grace and love is not the same as having things set, safe and sedate. Living in God's grace and waiting to see the fruit being borne on your branches can be a long slow process. It is not linear and not predictable. God has endless patience. We do not have that kind of patience, but God knows that. All we can do is to keep turning to Jesus – keep turning in our sinfulness and our sorrow, keep turning in our sickness and pain. Keep turning to God. It is in the turning that we will find renewal. It is in the turning we will find God and at last come to rest in the saving grace of God's arms.

ⁱ Sermons that Work, Very Rev. Anthony F.M. Clavier, March 11, 2007 - Third Sunday in Lent - Year C [RCL]

http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermons_that_work_82856_ENG_HTML.htm

ⁱⁱ New Proclamation, Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2006-2007, Fortress Press, MN, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ New Proclamation, Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, 2006-2007, Fortress Press, MN, 2006.