

**Grace Episcopal Church , Galena IL
March 3, 2013, Lent 3C**

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
"Bearing Fruit"
Text-Luke 13: 1-9**

The first part of today's Gospel text was used last Tuesday night at the Soup and Study program of our five Galena churches. It was used to illustrate one of our "hard questions" in the Bible: why do bad things happen to good people. It is a question that has persisted through centuries for theologians and for average people of faith. It is a question that seemingly has no answer—or at least none that is final and satisfactory. It is also known as the question of evil or the question of theodicy. It goes like this: if God is all powerful, if God is all knowing, if God is all loving, then why does evil exist? Why do the bad things happen.

Well, for the people in Jesus' day, and for some people even today, it is a matter of deserving. You get what you deserve. So, if bad things happen, it's your own fault. This is what the crowd is asking Jesus.

Some step forward to tell a horrible story. Some Galileans came to make a sacrifice at the Temple and were slaughtered by Pilate so that their blood ran and mingled with that of the sacrificial animals. They were murdered *and* their holy place was desecrated! Wasn't this horror a sign of the times? What did it mean? In their fear, the storytellers didn't say it, but they were probably assuming—hoping—that Jesus would say the murdered Galileans had committed some awful sin, that they deserved what they got and were being punished by God.

But Jesus says, "no, they were no worse than anyone else. God had nothing to do with it." And then, he gives them another example. Not only were those murdered by the act of a human being (a high-placed public official) not guilty of sin, but what about this? A tower, probably part of an aqueduct project for which Pilate was using Temple monies, collapsed, crushing eighteen people who happened to be standing where the tower fell. Had they done terrible things? Were they being punished? No, they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The workers on the other side of the tower were spared. An accident—not the fault of any individual. It just happened, killing innocent bystanders.

The questions that concerned the crowds two thousand years ago are no different from the ones we wrestle with today. Imagine that storytellers tell Jesus of a horrible story—young children and teachers at a school were shot and killed and many others injured by a man with a gun. People in a movie theatre, or in a college lecture hall, or in an office building, going about the business of learning or working or enjoying some entertainment, suddenly killed. Were these victims being punished for some awful sin? Once again, no.

I recall hearing a story about a pastor who was at the scene of a devastating tornado. He watched as a news crew moved in with cameras and microphones to interview some of the survivors. They were saying things like, "God must have been looking out for us." "God was really on our side today!" Then the pastor looked across the street where people were sobbing and mourning, for their family members had not survived. Where was God for them?

These kinds of things strike at our greatest anxieties. How badly we want explanations, reasons, or places to put blame. That would make everything nice and tidy. Bad things only happen to bad people. There are predictable consequences. And since we are not bad—not terribly bad, anyway—we can be assured that we will be okay. We even prefer explanations when they are horrifying—like acts done by terrorists or psychopaths. Because then we can set them at a safe distance from our own lives. It is less likely that we or our friends and loved ones will be touched.

But Jesus is clear—he does not offer escape from suffering and death. Things can be truly random, and tragedy can strike without reason or warning. It is not about God and punishment or reward.

Then Jesus says something really strange. The people who died were not greater sinners. There is no relationship between sin and suffering *but you must repent or you will die like they did!* Huh???

Well, maybe Jesus just took advantage of an opportunity—a teachable moment. When the people were feeling vulnerable, very much aware of the fragility of life, he tweaked their fear of all the terrible things going on around them. Don't dwell on the tragedies or on death, even though we know we will all die. Pay attention to the lives you have been given and how you are living. Live as if you could lose your life at any moment.

Repent and live fully. What is repentance, anyway? We might think of the zealot on the street corner shouting about repentance and the coming end of the world. The John the Baptist look-alike who looks and acts somewhat crazed. Or the cult or fundamentalist sect that insists that you must be saved and believe as they do or you will burn in hell.

Repentance, though, in the New Testament, is related to three Greek words. Their theological meanings all have to do with “turning around,” “turning away from all that is against God and turning to God.” In the preaching of Jesus and the early church, it means a radical transformation of our relationships with both God and our neighbor—a reorientation of our lives in both thought and action. I like to think of cellular phone signals. It is easy to drift out of range or into a place where the signals are weak and all you hear is static. If you move a short distance or reorient yourself toward the signal from the antenna, it becomes clear again. That, I think, is not unlike our relationship with God. We need to remain oriented so that the signal remains strong and clear.

Now we're not talking about huge, egregious sins here. We are talking about sin as “missing the mark.” “Being off-center.” All of the small things that have the tendency to separate us from God. Sometimes that is just something like focusing too much on our own achievements and success, getting too caught up in the frenzy of life and never having enough time for God. Sometimes we become convinced that our own efforts are enough and we don't really need God. Or sometimes even when we are having problems, we fail to call on God, believing that we must carry the burdens on our own shoulders. Take a good look for a moment at where most of our attention goes—do we spend more time making certain our house and car have regular maintenance than we do maintaining and caring for our souls?

There was a man in a Bible study class who had reached a certain stage of life. He had celebrated a significant birthday of his own, and, then, within a few months experienced the deaths of several friends and associates. He was badly shaken and became even more aware of his own mortality. Now, this was a man who had his share of tragedy in his life. He was also a good citizen who was active in his church and civic affairs—a leader and fine, outstanding example in his community. As he shared his concerns with us, I learned that he feared that he had not done the right things in his life

or at least not enough of the right things. And he worried a lot about judgment and not passing muster on that not-so distant day that when he would meet his Maker. I came to realize that his image of God was one of a judge with a checklist, keeping track of the good deeds and the sins which would, one day, be scored and totaled.

We talked about that image. And about other possible images of God. A God who does not only forgive but forgets. A God who is not like human beings who tend to dredge up all the old hurts when we get upset or angry. If God has a list at all, the items are erased and forgotten when we ask for forgiveness, when we repent.

This is the image of God that Jesus gives us in the parable of the fig tree. The unproductive fig tree is taking up precious land, and the owner is concerned about production and profit and wants it cut down so that something else can be planted that will yield fruit. The gardener lobbies for more time—one more season to fertilize and water and nurture. Another chance to bear fruit. As parables go, this one is fairly straightforward. God is the owner, we human beings are the barren fig tree, Jesus is the gardener. We have not fulfilled our call to be fruitful. We have not, thus far, responded to the loving care that has been lavished on us. But it is a merciful and gracious God who does not give up on us and allows us another chance.

But we cannot bear fruit on our own. We need sunlight and moisture and rich soil. We need to be cultivated and weeded and fertilized. Fortunately for us, these things are all readily available to us if only we have eyes to see and ears to hear. We can cultivate our souls through daily prayer and reading of the Bible, through sharing in worship together, and in living out our lives through acts of justice and compassion to others.

As our souls are nourished in both our private devotions and our corporate worship and community life, we are empowered for a transformed way of living. This may come in the way we live our daily lives—the decisions we make in our families and in how we use our influence in the workplace. It may be reflected in the choices we make in the use of our resources—our time and our treasure. There are so many needs in our world, today. Sometimes it seems that what we can is just a drop of water in a vast sea of need. But that is not so.

One pastoral theologian tells the story of a mental hospital where the worst cases were placed in a back ward. They were considered hopeless and got only the minimum care and calls from the medical staff. Then a church women's group began to visit the patients in this hospital. No one bothered to tell them that these patients in the back ward were unsalvageable, so they visited them, too, bringing them cookies, talking and praying with them. Soon some of them began to respond, and some even improved enough to be moved to the regular wards.

There are all kinds of ways that our church, our denomination reaches out to the lost and lonely, the victims of disaster, war, and violence. Each drop of water matters, whether it be immediate assistance of money or food, or whether it is speaking up and advocating for those who are victims of unjust laws and practices—trying to change the system.

In three weeks, on Friday, March 22, I hope to be in Chicago joining with others in our Diocese on the second annual interfaith walk from St. James Commons to Stroger Hospital—the county hospital where the largest percentage of gun violence victims are taken. This is the Crosswalk Initiative, started at All Saints Episcopal Church in the Ravenswood neighborhood of Chicago where the Stroger chaplain is a member. This walk, and other activities, have become a powerful witness.

When thousands of members of the faith community rally and make a statement, it draws attention. Not just for Chicago, not just for Cook County, but for the whole state—and maybe the nation. Our voices can make a difference!

Anyone who is successful in gardening knows that gardens must be tended with regularity. It doesn't work to weed and fertilize like crazy one week and then let it all go for a month until the weather is better or it is more convenient. When the weeds get a head start, the task becomes more and more daunting. And it becomes tempting to just give up. The same is true of our spiritual lives.

God reaches out to us always. We need only turn around—turn ourselves toward God with all our hearts and we will bear fruit. We cannot be assured of being safe from all harm or of freedom from suffering and death. But we are called to live our lives fully, cultivating and nurturing our souls with daily care and attention, then bearing the fruit of that care into the world. If we will but return to the God who created us and loves us, we will have life and will have it abundantly.

Amen and amen.