

# Third Sunday in Lent

## “CROSS” FERTILIZATION

Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent

Analysis by Norb Kabelitz

1At that time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” 6Then he told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I still find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” 8He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

---

## DIAGNOSIS: When Bad Things Happen

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Troubling Local and World Disasters*

“I-35 Bridge Collapses! 13 Killed!”; President Consoles South’s Tornado Victims”; “Bus Overturms onto I-75 Killing 6;

“Katrina!”; “9-11 and Twin Towers!”; “Bank Failures!”; “Recession!”; “Haiti Earthquake Disaster!” The disaster stories always ask why? What or who is at fault? Who was in charge—Mother Nature or who? We want answers! Why did the bridge fail? Who is at fault? Appoint a committee, have a hearing to investigate! I wonder how the headlines read in the two situations Jesus names: “Anti-Roman Militants [Galileans!] Slaughtered During Temple Sacrifices”; “Eighteen Workers Crushed As Tower Collapses.” The culprits seem to be obvious: In the first story, Pilate ordered it because someone apparently identified them as Galilean revolutionaries; and, in the second story 18 were crushed because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time! But why did the Tower fall? Shoddy construction? Were the victims at fault somehow? Were Pilate’s accused really revolutionary sinners? Or did their “Galilean accent” betray them? Do we die such deaths because we are worse than others? And we haven’t even gotten to the big “Why” questions.

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *The Blame Game***

In Jesus’ time, moral wisdom seemed to be frozen in the traditional belief that if bad things happened to people, they must have been bad people who deserved bad consequences. (See the controversy regarding the blind man in John 9:2, or forgiveness for the paralyzed man in Luke 5:20-24.) Do we blame the victim? Serves them right! Some of that kind of moral judgment is still with us. Take the AIDS epidemic! It is God’s punishment for sexual immorality, (homosexuality) say the traditionalists. They are “worse sinners!” The homeless epidemic! Serves them right! Lazy no-goods! But is being poor a self-inflicted consequence or intertwined with our use and distribution of resources and hiring, or both? Jesus says, “Out of the heart” proceeds injustice and the blame game (Mark 7:21). Jesus seems to suggest that we are all somehow interconnected for better or for worse involving “what we have done or left

undone!" So is it that some people are worse than others, or that we are all in this together? "Do you think that those Galileans were worse sinners than all the others in Galilee?" [See Luke 22:59 where Peter is identified as a Galilean or Judas the Galilean in Acts 5:35-37.] Check out "Galilee" in your concordance and see how often Galilee is the source of suspicious revolutionaries and insurgency. Same for Siloam. "Worse than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Does Jesus suggest that we are all involved in this "any worse" situation? Are we corporately involved in some sinister, devious, or mysterious way?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Bell Tolls for Thee***

The mega story seems to have been captured by John Donne, the poet, "Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee!" The mega story is not just that towers and bridges collapse because of sub-standard material and construction, or that space ships malfunction because of unfortunate mistakes, or political power is used for better or worse against accused revolutionaries, but that we are a global spaceship mysteriously infected with "sin-cancer," and if we do not deal with our sin (so much more than mere malfeasance, malevolence, or malefactors), we will all perish "as they did" (v. 3). We try to deal with "malefactors" (mentioned in Steps 1 and 2) by application of local or global "law" to determine guilt and punishment, but we still face the ultimate judgment of God who sees the potential evil in all human hearts. Romans 2:12-16 devastates us all. Repentance must become a daily habit and practice. But can genuine repentance be the fruit of threat and punishment? "Better be good or else"? "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did!" Can genuine repentance come out of that? (See Isa. 1:4-6 and Jer. 5:3.)

## **PROGNOSIS: When Good Things Happen**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Salutary Intervention***

What might it mean to hear the dramatic declaration as stated in today's collect, "Your kingdom has broken into our troubled world through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son"? Is it really true that "God sent his Son into the world not to condemn it, but to save it (John 3)!? We love the "gardener" in the story. Maybe Mary Magdalene was not so wrong to identify the Risen Lord as a "gardener." He would delay the owner's judgment to open an opportunity for grace. It will take some digging, pruning, and manure to be sure. If Jesus is like the gardener, don't we see him "digging" among the people with his word to loosen the hard soil of dead traditions? Loosened soil can receive water and manure. Might we call it "cross fertilization"? Is that what Lutherans mean by "Law and Gospel"? Is Jesus offering himself and the Cross message as "manure" to save the tree? Maybe what Joseph said in Egypt applies here in some cruciform way: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today." Or as Jesus said about himself: "Unless the seed gets dropped into the ground and dies it cannot bear fruit" (see John 12:24). Go with this!

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Salutary Repentance***

In the Leipzig debate with Luther in 1519, Eck asserts that the "beginning of repentance lies in the fear of punishment." Luther replied that nobody is ever disposed to repentance by the fear of punishment... It was grace, he said, that drew the prodigal son; "otherwise he would have died rather than go back to his father." (For details see W.H.T. Dau, *The Leipzig Debate on Repentance*, Concordia Publishing House, 1919, pp. 181-184). Eck seems to suggest that the painful experiences in our lives are

fertilizer toward repentance. We might call that “dung” theology. But Luther would insist that in Christ we are kissed into life to make a U-Turn. It is faith in Christ’s work and promise that turns us around, not fears in a troubled world.

(If we might think that bad events can serve as a “wake-up call,” history shows that it does not lead to genuine repentance!)

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Salutary Good Fruit***

Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese Christian once wrote: “I read in a book, that a man called Christ, went about doing good. It was very disconcerting to me that I am so easily satisfied with just going about.”

God’s fruit trees were not planted merely to look good, but to be good for something. The “sin” of the fig tree is not that it was doing something bad, but that it was doing nothing—just taking up space in the vineyard. The Gardener turned out to be more than a caretaker in a graveyard, but one who invested himself in fruitless trees so that they might not only look good, but bear fruit—good for people to eat and be nourished. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control” (Gal. 5:22-25). This is said of those who “belong to Christ,” people who have undergone “cross fertilization”! In our troubled accident-prone, disaster-ridden world, might we not become “show-and-tell” trees that bear good fruit, samples of produce good for something, good for people in bad times?!