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Were They Worse Sinners?

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 13:1-5

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You know, even though it doesn't seem that long ago, tomorrow marks the 16th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center. September 11th, 2001, a day where nearly three thousand people died. And let me ask, were they worse sinners than you and me? Or, how about the people suffering from the floods in Houston, the devastation from the hurricane in the Caribbean, or the earthquake in southern Mexico, or those right now in Florida. Losing their homes, their possessions, maybe more. Are they worse sinners than you or me? I could go on and on, reminding you of the past sufferings at Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, the Charleston South Carolina church shooting, even that poor woman run down in Charlottesville. Were they worse sinners than you and me? No, of course not! But when tragedies like these occur, and the initial shock wears off, the question on everybody's mind, is why? Why? Why did this happen? And for the victims and their families, the question is an even more direct and somber "why?" Why, God, did you let this happen to me, my spouse, or worse, my child? Yes, why, God, did you let this happen!

Now back in the time of Jesus, it was a common belief that when something bad happened to someone, it was either because they were sinners who had done something wrong, or because the sins of their parents fell upon them. They were to blame – they were being punished by God for sins that had been committed. So in today's Scripture when Jesus is teaching among the crowds and someone tells him about Pontius Pilate's soldiers massacring a group of Galileans for no good reason, he knows what's going through their minds – “Why did this happen? Those Galileans must have done something wrong.” But Jesus stops them from thinking this way and takes them in an entirely different direction. He begins by posing to them their own question. "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee? Is that why they suffered?" Then Jesus refers to another incident – “What about the eighteen people who were killed when a tower fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem?" And then Jesus quickly dispels the “blame game” theory. “No! Not at all! Not at all!” And then he tells them to repent. Repent! But what does that have to do with anything?

Well, according to United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon, it has a lot to do with everything. Referring to this particular passage, he states, “People, please take note. As riveting as we may find the “why” question, Jesus seemingly cares less. Jesus knows questions like this deter us from the real question. The real question is not about life’s unfairness or troubles or sufferings or how bad things can happen to

good people like us. The real question in this life that we need to ask, is how do we stand before God, and what is our relationship with God. Let me repeat that. The real question in this life that we need to ask, is not, why did this happen, but rather, how do we stand before God and what is our relationship with God. That's what Jesus is trying to get us to focus on. Because so many of us persist in the idea that there must be a direct correlation between the sort of person I am, and the bad or good things which come my way in this life. I am troubled, I am suffering, I have been harmed, why do I deserve this? And that's the problem – most of the time, we don't want God, we want answers. Why did this happen to me? Well, probably for no good reason. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Because the notion that only good things happen to good people was put to rest once and for all... when they hung Jesus Christ on the cross, and put him to death.¹

That's the reason Jesus redirects our "why" question to make us focus on our relationship with God. Because as we go through this life, I'm quite certain that someday in the future there will be another act of terrorism or natural disaster or tragic shooting that we will hear about. Or, a terrible accident may befall any one of us. Or, any one of us may become stricken with a terminal illness. You see, these things are graphic reminders that life is fragile, and because we know the randomness in how and when catastrophes can strike, we need to take Jesus' advice and make sure we are ready to stand before God in a right relationship. So let me read a promise for you from the Bible, from Psalms. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers. But their delight is in the law and the teachings of the Lord. On these things they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, that always yield good fruit, and their leaves never wither. In all that they do they prosper. The wicked are different. They are like chaff scattered by the wind. They will be condemned at the time of judgment." But the righteous shall triumph.

And isn't this really the bottom line? That, in all the tragedies we see and experience, we want to be assured that our worst fears will be replaced with confident hope. That everything will be put right again. That we will be saved. That's why, after every tragedy we hold in such high esteem the firemen and policemen and first responders who save people. And yet, look at what happened in both New York and Houston on the first Sunday after those tragedies - churches were packed. Because down deep we all know who our true Savior is. Our God, who is all powerful and sovereign and supreme. And, who has already proven that good will triumph over evil. Let's go back to Willimon's example of a bad

¹ Collected Sermons: Will Willimon

thing that happened to the good person – the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. This event was undoubtedly one of the worse displays of evil there ever was – an innocent man was nailed to a cross - the Son of God, was killed. And everyone thought that was the end, that evil had the final word. But God was not finished. Three days later, the light broke through the darkness – Christ was raised, the sins of humanity were forgiven, death was defeated, and evil was replaced with joy and hope and the assurance that God’s good and perfect plan eventually comes to pass. You see, it may take three days, three years, or even a lifetime. But ultimately, God will set things right. Even when we can’t now see or understand the "why."

In fact, Jesus told a parable about this very thing. It was a parable about a landowner who sowed only good seeds of wheat in his field. Now the landowner in this parable is God. And God sows his seeds with the intention of only good results for us and this world. But, in the parable, when everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and then went away. As the seeds matured, the workers in the field found both the wheat and weeds growing together. And as any farmer knows, weeds are bad for the wheat – they take away the nutrients and water needed to produce a good crop. And so the workers were troubled, and they asked, "Where did the weeds come from?" But the landowner's answer was matter-of-fact, "An enemy has done this." And then he let the matter drop. The landowner, apparently to the workers surprise, and I think to ours as well, appears unhurried to remedy the problem. But then he goes on to explain the hazards of pulling out the weeds, lest the wheat be uprooted along with them. Jesus’ disciples were fascinated with this story and asked him for more of an explanation. Jesus said, "The field is the world, and the good seeds are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the children of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil." And then he assures them that at the right time, at the time of harvest, he will handle it, and everything will be made right. You see, once again, Jesus does not bother to answer the questions that may trouble us. He does not tell us why there is evil or suffering. Neither does he say or explain who, or how the devil gets his power. Tragedies exist, and Jesus takes this reality as a given.

But the point of this parable is to remind us that sometimes when we are impatient with what happens in our world, and we question God's interest or involvement, with our, "Why, Lord, did this happen?" we might stop and consider this: perhaps the landowner sees a bigger picture, a greater plan, and knows something wonderful that we do not. Because remember, Jesus did assure us this... that some day everything, everything, will be set right."² Amen.

²The Will of God in an Unwilling World: J. Ellsworth Kalas