

Sermon (Untitled)

On Thursday of last week, around 150 people went to work at Excel in Hesston. Three of them are dead, more are still in the hospital, and we are left wondering: Why? Why again? We're often left wondering "why" in life. We're left wondering "why" after man-made tragedies like this, we're left wondering "why" after someone gets cancer, or a bridge collapses in Minnesota and people die, as happened a few years ago.

We want to know the answer. We ask God, and we're met with silence, or someone will tell us something unsatisfying, like, "there was corrosion in the joints on the bridge", which is a fine answer for engineers, but not for victims, who were asking a different question altogether.

Maybe we can't understand the real answer. After all, in the Isaiah 55 passage we read today, God says,

“...my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

The people in our Gospel lesson came to Jesus telling him about some people who were murdered in grisly fashion. Pontius Pilate had people murdered when they were offering sacrifices at Jerusalem. Why?

Maybe the people were asking Jesus this because they wanted to prompt him to anger, so that he would be more like the Zealots and overthrow the government. Or maybe they just simply said, “Hey, have you heard about this? Why?”

In any case, Jesus gives (in my opinion) a very unsatisfying answer. Instead of telling us why, (again, maybe we wouldn't understand the real answer), he says, “Do you think that these people who died at the hand of Pilate were worse sinners than any of you? No, they were not, but unless you repent, you will die like each one of them.”

And then he says, “What about the tower of Siloam that fell and killed 18 people? Do you think that these people were worse sinners than any of you? (3:18) No!” But he does say that if you don't repent, then you will all die like they did.

These are not very comforting words, and they are odd words, too. He says that these people were not worse sinners than you, but you will die like they did too unless you repent. He can't mean that towers will fall on all of us. (There aren't that many towers!) In John 9, he says that a man was born blind not because of his own sins or the sins of

his parents, so I guess God doesn't punish people here on Earth for their sins. God gives us time.

The next parable that Jesus tells seems to confirm this. God says, "There once was a man who owned some land, and there was a fig tree on it, and the fig tree had not produced fruit for 3 years (a long period of time.) So the landowner says, "Cut it down. Let's use the land for another tree that *will* produce fruit." But the gardener says, "No, let's not cut it down yet. Let's give it another year. I'll take care of it. I'll fertilize it. We'll see next year (or after some time) if it does give fruit. If it doesn't, then all right, we'll cut it down."

Odd, that the message in all three seems to be that if you don't bear fruit—that if you don't repent/turn around/face God—then we'll perish. We'll be cut down. *(In this paragraph, I mentioned that repentance is something done daily, hourly...we never become perfect on Earth. –mjf)*

So what does this mean? Jesus does talk a lot about judgment and Hell. Maybe it means that if we don't repent here on Earth, then we will face judgment and Hell afterwards. I don't like this interpretation, because (1) it scares me, and (2) it doesn't seem like the One who said, "There was a prodigal son who came back home, and the father met him with a huge hug and threw a party. And there was a woman who lost a coin and searched for that coin until she found it and celebrated. Or the shepherd who lost one sheep out of a hundred and searched for that sheep until he found it, and he rejoiced. It doesn't seem like Jesus, who was on the cross and asked God to *forgive his murderers* because "they knew not what they did." So I don't like this interpretation saying that Jesus was talking about judgment and Hell. Now whether this interpretation is *correct*, I don't know. Humans are complex. Why would we expect God to be simple?

There is a second interpretation. Some think that Jesus was actually talking about the nation of Israel. (They weren't really a *nation* at the time, but ruled by the Romans.) Jesus was saying, "repent and bear fruit, otherwise your nation will be destroyed"--and the nation was destroyed by the Romans when they destroyed the Temple in the year 70-something AD. Maybe the Romans would not have done that if the people had been living by the law of Love instead of the law of insurrection.

A third interpretation is that He could have been making a statement about institutions. "Bear fruit, Lorraine Avenue Mennonite, because things will go well for you that way. If you don't bear fruit—if you don't work for the Kingdom of God and help each other, then your church will gradually weaken over time, and you'll eventually have to shut your doors. You'll just become too weak, and then you'll be replaced by some other church, and they'll tell people about me, my love, and my Kingdom."

The last interpretation I have is that this was God as a conflicted parent. God was saying, "Look. It is obvious to me that you're living in a way that hurts others and yourself." God says, "I know that you haven't been behaving right. I don't accept evil.

Turn around. Face Me.” So God is saying, “I notice these bad things”, and *that* is judgment—God will confront us with our actions and the results of our actions. The other side of God the parent is saying “Turn to me. I’ll forgive you. Listen! I love you! Repent—turn around—because if you don’t, you will not find *yourself*. You will not grow into whom I created you to be. You will waste the unique gifts I gave you, and the good work I intended for you to do will be done by someone else. You will lose yourself by becoming someone else, controlled by something else like money or power or peer pressure—something that doesn’t love you and cannot care about you. You will not learn to *trust* Me. Life could go so much better for you, my precious child.”

In the end, we are no closer to finding the answer to “why”—why do bad things happen—than we were at the beginning. But we are given a new focus: God is waiting for each of us to run into God’s arms and receive just what we need—be it fertilizer and water to grow, comfort during a hard time, friendship when we’re lonely, wisdom when we’re lost, or a love that will never die.