

Political protest in Canada is not new. Whether the issue was the women's movement or the dangers of nuclear power, young people (and some older protesters) found a way for their voices to be heard. Political protesters believe that they can change the world. And so interaction with the public has become an effective – sometimes quite effective – form of political action whether it be marching in a group or standing on the street corner with a sign. I recall being in the car driving through Washington, DC, with a friend and her young children. And there on the corner was a bearded long-haired young man in a long white robe with a sign that read “Repent!” The other side of the sign read “The end is near!” One of the older children in the car became very excited and called out: “Look it's Jesus!” I don't know if the fellow on the corner was a Jesus freak or part of the 70's Jesus movement, but he wanted to change the world and his message was clear. Jesus told his followers to repent now because time is short. The world was in need of changing then – just as it still is today. And Jesus had a hard lesson to bring to the world.

In the first part of today's reading from Luke's Gospel those around Jesus brought the news that Pilate had slaughtered a number of Galileans and their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices to God. Perhaps the people thought that the time for reconciliation had passed since blood had been shed. For these ancients, sin was the direct cause of calamity. The common assumption would have been that if these Galileans died, then they must have been sinners. To them God was responsible for everything; God was a just God. Therefore this tragedy was the result of human sinfulness. If they died it was the result of their sins. But if God is the cause of all events, then where is there room for human freedom? Or for freedom of the created order of the world? Or for those events that God does not control? Jesus took this as a teachable moment. He pointed out the fallacy of their beliefs. He told them: “No, I tell you.” Jesus

wanted them – and us – to understand that God does not micromanage creation as they thought. Fred Buechner, the 20<sup>th</sup> century writer and theologian puts it this way:

The question is not whether the things that happen to you are chance things or God's things because, of course, they are both at once. There is no chance thing through which God cannot speak – even the walk from the house to the garage that you have walked ten thousand times before, even the moments when you cannot believe that there is a God who speaks at all anywhere. [God] speaks...and the works [God] speaks are incarnate in the flesh and blood of our selves and of our own footsore and sacred journeys.<sup>1</sup>

God is surely present with us in all the tragedies and calamities of our lives as well as the mundane and common place and the highest of spiritual times. God does not cause these high and low moments, but God surely walks with us and weeps with us and rejoices with us throughout all our journeys.

So Jesus said No, God does not control the highest and lowest of our days, but then he went one step further and said “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as [the Galileans] did.” (13:5), meaning you are just like them, just as subject to untimely suffering or death as they, and you will die just as surely as they died. Those who died were not greater sinners than the others in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> If they didn't repent, if they didn't turn around, if they did not do a 180, if they did not have a total change of heart, then they would surely die. Just as the Galileans perished, so would those who heard Jesus perish if they did not repent. Death here was a metaphor for the coming judgment – the judgment at the end of their time. Jesus's words were shocking to them. They are shocking to us. But the need for repentance was urgent in those times. It is just as urgent in our day.

Jesus then told them the parable of the barren fig tree. There are similar stories of unfruitful trees in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature. In Ahikar, the Assyrian sage's story it goes like this:

And I spake to Nathan thus: Son, thou hast been to me like a palm-tree which has grown with roots on the bank of the river. When the fruit ripened, it fell into the river. The lord of the tree came to cut it down, and the tree

said: leave me in this place, that in the next year I may bear fruit. The lord of the tree said: Up to this day hast thou been to me useless, in the future thou wilt not become useful.<sup>3</sup>

In Ahikar the lord of the tree cut it down. Likewise, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, the fig tree was cut down with no reprieve. In Luke's parable, however, the gardener intercedes on behalf of the tree, pleading for one more year. And Jesus is merciful, but still warns of the urgency of repentance. The time of judgment is extended for a year – but for only one year.

The people around Jesus thought that surely tragedy of any sort must have been God's punishment for their sins, their father's sins, or sins that had escaped human notice, but not God's. Wrong! Jesus says, not so! But he also says that without repentance they – and we – could perish – could be cut down – as the fig tree that bore no fruit. If we do not repent – if we do not bear fruit in a year, the parable says – then we are to be cut down!

We could say that Jesus was merely using hyperbole to shock us. It was the common manner of speech in the Jewish community used to get people's attention. But I would caution us to think hard about Jesus's warning. In verses just prior to this “repent or perish” parable, Jesus said: If you think that I came to bring peace to the earth, think again. He said: No, I came to bring division – “father against son, and son against father; mother against daughter, and daughter against mother; mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law” (Luke 12:52). In another teaching earlier in Luke, Jesus had taught about judging others, condemning others, and about forgiveness. He concluded that teaching on repentance and judgment by using another fig tree metaphor, saying “No good tree bears bad fruit. We are known by our fruit; Jesus said that “[t]he good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good....it is out of abundance of the heart” that we act and speak (Luke 6:43-45).

Some Christian interpreters have been quick to say, that we should see this parable as an allegory with the fig tree and the vineyard representing Israel. The owner then would be God. The gardener would be Jesus. And the three years would refer to the period of

time of Jesus's ministry. Now often Israel is represented as the vineyard, and the fig tree would be as well. But whether a metaphor or allegory, the message is clear. We have but a short time to heed the teachings of Jesus. If we do not use the time remaining to us, we will perish like the Galileans, we will be cut down like the fig tree.

It is a stern teaching but one that we must take to heart, my friends. We do not live in an agrarian world these days, although here in Alberta we are more closely connected to the earth. But in the 1<sup>st</sup> century arable land was precious, so an unfruitful tree could not be allowed to use the resources that could nourish a fruitful one. Still we can understand that a farmer or gardener might want to give the fig tree – give us – one last opportunity to bear good fruit.

I believe that Jesus was calling the hearers of the parable of the fig tree – and he is calling us today – not just to live better lives – not just to be sorry for our missteps – but to truly repent – to turn around – to take a hard look at our lives and to see God's presence in our lives and in the world – and to reorient ourselves to live and love into the ministry Jesus taught and continues to teach us through word and sacrament. Only then can we live into the fruitful lives for which we were intended. Perhaps all we really need to change the world is a bit a manure and the love of a faithful gardner – Jesus.

So let us spread the fertilizer right down the centre aisle and all the way into our homes and into every aspect of our lives. Let us be liberal with the water. Let us tend the fig trees that are our lives so that we produce much fruit. Calamities may come. The future is uncertain. Life is precious. The time is now. May we thrive and bear abundant good fruit – enough to share.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner (b. 1926), *Listening to Your Life* (Harper Collins, 1992), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Interpreters Bible*, Vol. IX, (Abingdon Press, Nashville), "Commentary on Luke 13:1-9," pp. 269 – 272 was used throughout this sermon.

<sup>3</sup> Ahikar 8.25, Armenian, in R.H. Charles, *apocripha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1913), 2:775.