

Ashamed No More

Lent 3: Invitation, Challenge and Grace

March 3, 2013

Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

Stories of war, disaster, tragedy fill our newspapers and news channels. Innocent people dying from drone attacks, school shootings, and suicide bombers. Intentional acts of violence targeting innocent and not-so-innocent people alike. It is disheartening to listen to the news or read the newspaper. And yet, there's also a part of human nature that wants to know, that wants to see the tragedy, to know the details of what happened and why. Some of that wanting to know is to be able to explain the why of what happened, so that we can then protect ourselves from it happening to us. Some of that wanting to know is to fuel or confirm beliefs we have about the world or other people.

Perhaps that is why some of those with Jesus felt the need to tell him about the innocent Galileans who were killed at worship by Pilate, their blood mingling with the blood of the animals they were sacrificing. There is outrage, and the desire, perhaps, to have this news fuel Jesus' righteous indignation, and lead him to call for revenge. See how evil Pilate and the Romans are? See how they oppress and kill us? Our own people, on pilgrimage in Jerusalem, gunned down while they were at worship! It is outrageous. We cannot let it go un-noticed. We cannot let it be un-avenged! We must arm all civilians with guns and weapons, so that they can protect themselves and others around them.

However, Jesus responds, not with a "yes, you're right. We need to go attack them," but with, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." And then he adds his own story from the wealth of local tragedy stories: "What about the 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

What is Jesus doing here, besides making his listeners angry and placing his safety at risk? For the people bringing up the story of the massacre of the Galileans in the temple are really saying, "If you're not for us, you're against us." In the context of attack and feeling vulnerable, we really want people to confirm what we are saying, to join our side, to rally all of us for battle.

Jesus seems to answer a question that hasn't even been asked. And yet, it is a question that is behind a lot of our questions about why bad things happen to good people. It is the question that was facing Job and his friends in the face of inexplicable suffering. Job's friends, as well-intentioned as they may have been, basically believed that there was no such thing as innocent suffering. People suffer because of sin they have committed, knowingly or unknowingly. In John 9, the people ask Jesus of the man who was born blind: Who sinned, this man or his parents? In the face of suffering, we want to know why, and we want to know who is to blame. And oftentimes, we blame the innocent victims, unconsciously believing that they must be in some way responsible for their own suffering: her skirt was too short, he fell asleep while smoking, they were driving drunk, they spend their money on lottery tickets instead of groceries.

And it seems to me, that that is the hook of shame--shame says that bad things happen to us because we are bad, because we are not worthy of the good life, because of the things that we have done that no one knows about. Shame loves the quiet and secret places of our hearts, where it can grow and keep telling us that we are worthless and bad, which can then lead to actions and behaviours which are not life-giving, which then reinforce that we are worthless and bad.

Jesus' response is then life-giving: these people who suffered did not do anything to deserve their suffering. Sometimes, bad things happen, and people get hurt as a result. It has nothing to do with what they have done. It is not a question of their being worthy or unworthy. Jesus speaks to their misguided belief that there are no innocent people; sometimes, there are no explanations for the things that happen in our lives. Suffering comes, but that does not mean we deserve it.

But then, the response turns uncomfortable: Repent, or you will perish! It is not enough to simply notice and agonize over the tragedies that confront us every day. Jesus seems to be saying, "see them as a wakeup call, a chance to examine your life to see what really matters in life." Rather than respond with revenge and anger to events that we have no control over, take the opportunity to reach out in love and compassion to those around you. Make a difference in your corner of the world, with the things that you can control.

And then he tells a parable about a fig tree that did not produce fruit. The owner of the vineyard planted a fig tree, and for 3 years, he kept coming to it to see if it had produced any fruit. In exasperation, he tells the gardener to dig out the tree, because it hasn't produced fruit and it is using up valuable nutrients in the soil. The gardener, wanting to do all he could to help the tree produce fruit, asked for one more year, in order to dig around the roots and add manure. The tree is given 1 more year to produce fruit, at which time, if it hadn't produced fruit, it would be dug out.

Any gardener knows that most plants, especially perennials, thrive on being cut back, pruned, divided. It seems counter-intuitive that cutting a plant in half at the roots would help it to thrive, but that is often the case. I planted a number of clematis soon after we moved into our first home, and 2 out of 3 of them bloomed every year. But one clematis did not bloom after the first year. For many years, it had beautiful green foliage, but no flowers. Finally, after more than 3 years, I was going to dig it out. But instead of digging it out, I cut all the old stalks back to just above ground. And wouldn't you know, that year it bloomed spectacularly! I then remembered that some clematis plants want to be cut back every year, and some don't. I just hadn't remembered which of mine wanted to be cut back, so treated them all the same.

Cutting, pruning and digging go counter to what we think produces life and fruit. Love, tenderness, gentleness--these are the things we think about that are life-giving. These are the ways we should treat people and things we care about. And they are definitely an important part of care. But sometimes, love looks like digging around at the roots; sometimes tenderness is the shovel that slices through a root head; sometimes gentleness is the pruning shears that cut back the dead stalks or the old stalks to make way for the new.

If shame needs secrecy and silence to grow and thrive, then bringing transparency, speech and compassion to it will be the digging around that is needed in order to turn what is dug up into the manure that will bring forth fruit. The hard stuff of our lives, when acknowledged, examined and brought into the open, is the fertilizer that leads to growth and new life.

Brene Brown has done lots of work and research on the topic of shame and vulnerability. (TED talks on YouTube; *The Gifts of Imperfection*) She started out researching what leads to wholehearted living, and found that people couldn't talk about love without also talking about hurt. They couldn't talk about what brings life, without talking about what gets in the way of it. As she listened to people's stories, she noticed that those who lived wholehearted lives, lived lives of courage, connection and compassion. They were people who were not afraid to be vulnerable, to admit their mistakes, and to try again. She realized that shame got in the way of the wholehearted life, and is what she calls the swampland of the soul. And the way we want to deal with swampland, is to look at it in disgust and turn our backs on it--if we don't acknowledge it, it doesn't exist.

But what people who live wholehearted lives do, is they reach out to a trusted friend, and with courage enter the swamp, not to set up house there, but to examine it and move through it. They have chosen not to believe shame's message that they are unlovable, but have chosen with courage, to reach out to a trusted friend, and respond with compassion to themselves and those around them. This requires lots of digging around the roots of the soul, lots of spreading of manure, and is hard and courageous work. This work requires the care and tending of the compassionate gardener, who desperately wants every tree in the vineyard to produce fruit.

Another of the lectionary texts for today is from Isaiah 55:1-9, a beautiful passage that begins:

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

This is a wonderful invitation to the good life, to a life of wholehearted living. It's an invitation that brings honour to the one who is being called--it doesn't matter that you have nothing, come to the feast. It doesn't matter that you think you are not worthy, God says, "I think you are worthy to come to this feast.

There are times when I am spiritually empty, when I think I can't possibly come, for I have nothing to offer; I can't possibly eat at the table, for I have nothing to contribute. And yet, it is at precisely those times when God invites us to come: come in your unworthiness; come in your emptiness; come in your want; come with your shame. I have food that is abundant and rich; I will feed you, you have only to come and my food will transform your shame into honour.

Over and over again, throughout scripture, God reaches out in honour to us, beckoning us to come, assuring us that we are beloved children of God. Our sense of unworthiness gets in the way of our being able to freely receive. The invitation remains, though, that we can come, even in our need and emptiness.

The challenge is that this is not easy work. Confronting the shame in our life, moving through it, requires courage on our part. And it is best faced in the presence of a trusted friend, and by relying on the constant presence of God. It is hard painful work, to dig around the roots of our shame. But we can treat ourselves with compassion, just as God compassionately says, "Come. Come and eat what is good. Eat until your souls are satisfied with food that money cannot buy."

We need be ashamed no more, for we are children of a God who says, "You are my beloved. Come to me."