

There were two incidents involving Jesus' Galilean kinsman that his followers wanted him to know about. We really don't know why. Perhaps it was to find out if any one of those massacred in the Temple or killed by the industrial accident were members of Jesus' family. If so, perhaps they wished to comfort the teacher or find out if his family needed anything.

Or, did the followers want to latch on to the tragedy to feel closer to Jesus, or just get closer to Jesus? Could be. It is part of human behavior to try to find a local connection to a newsworthy event, especially a tragic one, in order to share a little in the fame of the moment.

My research suggests that the followers came to Jesus in order to rile him up. Siloam may have been purely accidental, but the event in the Temple constituted a national tragedy. The blood of the victims mingled with the blood of the sacrificed animals. In addition to the loss of human life, the Temple altar was desecrated. The Galileans wanted Jesus to do something – something substantial – to avenge these horrendous acts against their people and their faith. In today's vernacular, one could say they wanted Jesus to make Galilee great again. Jesus didn't rise to the anxiety. He refused to engage in their self-righteous anger. He refused to have others' anger define him. In today's vernacular, Jesus refused to be codependent.

Instead, he saw the anxiety as, what I learned in pastoral theology, the presenting issue. What was deeply troubling the followers was that age old question: "Why do bad things happen to good people?" and its accompanying corollaries "They didn't deserve what happened to them" and, most importantly, "What must I do to make sure it won't happen to me?"

Jesus reminds the crowd that the tragedies that took the lives of the people of Galilee had nothing to do with their abundant faith or a lack of it. It had nothing to do with whether they were sinners or saints. One was an accident. The other was the consequence of the free will of a tyrant. In the midst of tragedy, Jesus reminds them and us that it is more important to tend to our own faith journey and repent of our own sins than to proclaim what's right or wrong about other people and praise or condemn them. He does this by telling them a story.

Submitted for our approval is a barren fig tree. Not only is it not producing fruit, it is sucking up valuable resources in the ground that could be used by other trees who are producing fruit. “Cut it down!” the farm owner says. “Let the trees that are more deserving benefit from the water and the minerals in the earth. In fact, let the tree rot and become a part of the ground itself so that in its dying it might become useful.”

The gardener, the Advocate, says “wait.” And then the gardener makes an audacious request. “Give me a year. Let me tend this shriveled up tree. Let me till the soil around it. Let me fertilize it and give it the nutrition that it needs. If that doesn’t work, do what you will.”

The parable holds a mirror up to the followers and the image reflected back to them is a forest of shriveled trees. They are trees unable to bear fruit because they are more concerned about others’ sins than they are about their own. They are trees that need nurture. They are trees that need to have their roots shaken a bit in order to loosen them up and make them more able to absorb the goodness around them.

The Advocate holds up the mirror in love. The barren trees deserve to bear fruit. They are worthy of the Advocate’s attentions. They are loved as much as all the other trees.

Jesus confronts his kinsman with the reality that as ‘normal’ as their anger may be, it is not doing them any good. Self-righteousness does nothing but keep us from acknowledging our need for God.

Fred Craddock suggests that the good news in the gospel of Luke is the message of repentance and forgiveness. It is the acknowledgement that none of us is given eternal life through our own actions or our own worthiness. We are given eternal life because there has been an Advocate who cares for us. In order that this gift not be perceived as deserved, we must take the initiative to examine our lives, discern where we have missed the mark with regard to our relationship with God, and then turn toward the direction that will restore that relationship.

We have no control in determining how or when or why our life on this earth might end. We all die. But we do have control over whether or not we will trust

God with our life, and consequently, with our death. Blaming others for the ills of the world may make us feel empowered, but it does little or nothing for our spiritual health. In fact, blame only inflames the ills of the world and labels people who need a little nurture and love as useless and deserving of destruction.

Instead, we need to trust the Advocate to love us into fruitfulness. We need to emulate the Advocate and help unloose those who are so tightly bound in their own rootedness that they can no longer bear the fruit that they used to bear. Our culture encourages and praises those who ride into battle, armored with their version of the truth. Jesus asks us to get down off those high horses and ask ourselves whether or not we are bearing fruit worthy of our faith. As we move into the second half of the Lenten season, it is a good time to assess which tree we resemble – the fruitful one or the barren one. And, if we are on the barren side – and we are all on the barren side at times in our lives – whether or not we are willing to trust the gardener to do what is necessary to make us fruitful once more.

Amen.