

“Reserving Judgment, Renewing Mercy”

Luke 13:1-9, Lent 3-C, Feb. 28, 2016

“Do you believe that these Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or how about those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them: Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2-5)

It certainly was heart-wrenching news that we all received about those three dozen tornados that touched down in various places, throughout seven of our southern states, this past week! The **SUGAR HILL TRAILER PARK** in Convent, Louisiana was completely **demolished**. **Two** people were killed and **seven** other people who lived there are still in **critical condition in hospitals nearby**.

In the **FLORIDA PANHANDLE** another tornado cut a **two-mile-long path**, injuring at least **six** people. The storms then stretched to **Mississippi** where a **73 year old man died**, when his **mobile home** was tossed over **500 feet into the air**. And a fierce line of storms continued to tear through **South Carolina** and **North Carolina**, and then continued in a northeastern direction, killing 4 people in **Waverly, Virginia**.

You know as I was praying for all the victims of these horrendous tornados, I couldn't help but wonder if there just **might not be at least some people**, who in the face of all of this **devastation and destruction**, would dare to ask themselves—similar questions to the ones Jesus certainly knew were **pressing heavy upon the hearts and minds of so many people** who were standing there before him in our Gospel lesson today.

“DO YOU THINK THAT THOSE SOUTHERNERS, WHOSE LIVES WERE TAKEN FROM THEM--without even a **moment's notice**, and whose homes and personal properties were **completely ransacked** in an instant, WERE WORSE SINNERS THAN ALL THOSE OTHER SOUTHERNERS WHOSE LIVES AND PROPERTY WERE COMPLETELY SPARED?”

It's hard to imagine that someone might **still think this way in 2016**, but in Jesus' day, especially in that **first century Jewish culture**—many people believed that **there was always a direct connection between sin and suffering**.

For St. John tells us that on another occasion, Jesus and his disciples came upon a man who had been **blind from birth**. Do you remember the question Jesus' disciples asked him on that day? “*RABBI, WHO SINNED THAT THIS MAN OR HIS PARENTS THAT HE, WAS BORN BLIND?*” Jesus answered them: “*It was not that this man sinned, or even that his parents sinned, but that the **works of God might be displayed in him***” (John 9:1-4), and then Jesus proceeds to give the man his sight and vision; all to the glory of God.

Maybe some of this **grave misunderstanding** so prevalent among the Hebrew people in Jesus' day resulted from their **misinterpretation** of Old Testament passages like--**Job 4:7**. Here a so-called friend of Job named **Epiphaz** comes to Job who had recently **suffered some horrific losses of his children to death, and property and personal health issues**, with that **finger-pointing, implicating question**: "WHAT TRULY INNOCENT PERSON HAS EVER SUFFERED?"

Well, let's be assured that Jesus set the record straight: "NO I TELL YOU, BUT UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH" (Vv. 2-3)! "*Or how about those 18 people upon whom the TOWER OF SILOAM FELL THAT KILLED THEM. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? NO, I TELL YOU; BUT UNLESS YOU REPENT YOU WILL ALL LIKEWISE PERISH!*"

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE THERE STILL TODAY WHO BELIEVE, FALSELY, THAT GOD'S NUMBER ONE JOB IS TO MAKE SURE THAT LIFE IS ALWAYS FAIR? In these peoples' minds, God is supposed to make sure that the **righteous people in this world always prosper**, and that the sinners are the ones who suffer for the **bad things that they have either thought, said, or done!**

But we heard WHAT GOD SAID TO HIS PEOPLE through the PROPHET EZEKIEL in our **Old Testament** lesson today didn't we?

First the people admit: "***Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?***" But then God tells Ezekiel to relay this message to them: "***As I live, declares the LORD, I have no delight in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from you evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel***" (Ezekiel 33:10-11)?

So often the New Testament tells us that we are living in an **era of God's grace today**, and will continue to do so until that moment comes when: "***THE LORD HIMSELF WILL DESCEND FROM HEAVEN WITH A CRY OF COMMAND, WITH THE VOICE OF AN ARCHANGEL, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words!***" (I Thessalonians 4:16-18)

Certainly one of the main points that Jesus is trying to drive home for us here is that you and are presently living at a time when **the LORD God Almighty, who created heaven and earth, is reserving his judgment**, to a very large degree, upon so many of us who are living in this world!

And while yes, admittedly and obviously, there are times when **our disobedience of God's commandments can land every one of us into a "heap of trouble,"** and no doubt, times when our **obedience to God's commandments** will bring a **blessing**

our way; from a purely human perspective: It just seems that there we are **sometimes when we just happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time!**

But from God's perspective: "The whole of creation is groaning in childbirth waiting for the sons and daughters of God to be revealed in glory" (Romans 8:22).

Some of the MOST SELF-DEFEATING WASTE OF TIME THAT YOU AND I CAN EVER BECOME ENGAGED IN, HOWEVER, IS WHEN WE SPEND INORDINATE AMOUNTS OF TIME TRYING TO FIGURE OUT WHY SOMETHING HAPPENED THE WAY THAT IT DID—even to those people who are considered **"good"** in the eyes of the world, though the Bible teaches us that: *"THERE IS NO ONE GOOD, NO NOT ONE"* (ROMANS 3:10)!

But still we like to pat ourselves on the backs occasionally, especially when the sun seems to be shining brightly on our own path and may falsely imagine that it's because we must be a lot better people, than those people over there, whose path is completely overshadowed with the black and ominous clouds of doom and gloom. And in doing so, we end up doing the very opposite thing of what God would have us to do! We don't reserve our judgment, but make bold and careless judgments upon one another all the time!

And if others are worse, then we must be better. But how does any of this square up with what Jesus also told us in his Sermon on the Mount? **"Our God is a God who makes his sun shine on the evil and on the good, and he is the same God who sends rain on the just and the unjust!" (Matthew 5:45)?**

The God whom Jesus came to reveal to us is the God, who in the **Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16)**, is the vineyard owner who **pays all of his workers the same wage!** Those who have come and **only worked in the last hour of the day end up being paid the same wage as those who agreed to work from sun up to sundown.** And even more shocking is that he pays the ones who came to work last, first! So Jesus says, **"The first shall be last and the last shall be first!"**

So let me now try to rephrase Jesus' question in a way that may ring a little more true for all of us here today: **Do you and I believe that we deserve all the good things that our gracious Heavenly Father showers down upon us in this life?**

This is certainly not what the Bible says! James writes: *"EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT COMES DOWN FROM ABOVE FROM THE FATHER OF LIGHTS, WITH WHOM THERE IS NO VARIATION OR SHADOW DUE TO CHANGE"* (JAMES 1:17).

Many good and wonderful things may come our way because we have been born anew into the kingdom of God, by his grace, and by his grace alone at work in our lives through Baptism and the Word of God, **BUT THIS CERTAINLY IS NOT BECAUSE WE, IN AND OF OURSELVES, ARE BETTER PEOPLE THAN EVERY OTHER TOM, DICK OR HARRY who is out there also making their way through this world!**

Did we really mean those words of the confession of our sins when we spoke them together at the beginning of our worship service today, when we confess to the **LORD God Almighty, through the reconciling death of Jesus, his only-begotten Son:** *“WE HAVE SINNED AGAINST YOU IN THOUGHT, WORD AND DEED, BY WHAT WE HAVE DONE AND BY WHAT WE HAVE UNDONE? WE HAVE NOT LOVED YOU WITH OUR WHOLE HEART; WE HAVE NOT LOVED OUR NEIGHBORS AS OURSELVES! WE JUSTLY DESERVE YOUR PRESENT AND ETERNAL PUNISHMENT?”*

If we do believe them, then there are certainly times in our lives when we need to **withhold the judgments we can so easily make upon other people, and renew a proper sense of mercy towards them instead!**

And isn't this what Jesus marvelous **Parable of the Fig Tree** is also reminding us in our Gospel lesson today (Luke 13:6-9)?

THE FIG TREE WAS POSITIONED THERE IN THE VINEYARD BECAUSE THE OWNER OF THE VINEYARD HAD PLANTED IT THERE. It was not unusual to see fig-trees in vineyards. Commentators tell us that a fig tree usually takes three years to reach maturity, and it is **not unusual for a fig tree to produce fruit** even before it produces leaves. If it is not bearing fruit by that time it is not likely to bear any fruit at all. But this fig-tree was given another chance!

You and I are members of **Christ's body the Church, only because God in his grace has planted us here.** And you remember how Jesus, on the night before he died, spoke of himself as being the **True Vine and of us being the branches (John 15)** . . .

And this Parable, just like Jesus' presentation of himself being the Vine and we the branches, reminds us that **USELESSNESS INVITES DISASTER.** Furthermore the parable teaches us that **NOTHING THAT ONLY TAKES OUT CAN SURVIVE!** **The fig-tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil, and in return was producing nothing!** This was precisely its sin. In the last analysis there are two kinds of people in this world: **Those who take out more than they put in, and those who put in more than they take out!**

“Die when I may,” said President Abraham Lincoln one day, “but I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow!”

But the plea of Jesus to every one of us today is to do it now! **THERE IS A PROFOUND SENSE OF URGENCY HERE!** St. Paul says in **Romans 13:11-12**, **“Besides this you know the time; that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light!”**

Father Andrew M. Greeley was a Catholic priest who died three years ago at the age of 85, but in the years before his death wrote a daily column for the CHICAGO SUN TIMES, THE NEW YORK TIMES, AND THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REVIEW. And in one story he sought to expound upon Jesus call for Urgency here: **“Once there was a couple who won a great prize through a radio contest and that prize was a two week trip to Ireland, for two, with all expenses paid. They had a whole year to take the trip, but at the end of those 12 months the offer would expire.**

“Well,” said the wife, “let's not do it in the summer, because we don't want to interfere with our usual summer plans at the lake. And we can't go in September because that's when our children go back to school and that's too much responsibility to place upon the grandparents!”

Then it came to be late October, before anyone knew it, and the husband said, “Well we can't go over the holidays!” “That's right,” his wife agreed. “Let's wait till after the first of the new year!”

But at a New Year's Eve party, a good friend of theirs who had traveled to Ireland three years before this pointed out to them that the **days were terribly short in Ireland in January and February, and the weather that time of years is never any good!**

So they said, **"Well, let's wait for spring when we know there will be good weather and we don't have to worry about the snow closing airports in this country or their country!"**

So finally, would you believe it, they actually did make the reservations to take that trip for two to Ireland, in May. **After all the weather is supposed to be grand in May in Ireland and the days were long!**

Yes, the couple admitted that they were cutting the timeline very close, because their opportunity to take that trip expired on June 1st. But they were confident nothing, but nothing could go wrong!

Unfortunately the **husband suffered a ruptured an acute form of appendicitis and required surgery, and because his appendix had actually ruptured inside of his body, the doctor said he would not be able to travel until the middle of June! Procrastinating to do something, waiting for a more perfect time, may be costly!**

Brothers and sisters, rather than our God being the kind of disparaging kind force in our lives that too many people falsely have presumed him to be, **our God is actually the patient gardener, who also pleads with us not to lower the boom of our harsh judgments upon other fallen sinners in this world, just like us too prematurely!**

So how will we choose to look at ourselves and to look at others during this Lenten season?

Hopefully we will take full advantage of this time when God is reserving his judgment against, and renewing us once again, through the Gospel, his abundant mercy! Will we do the same for others? Listen to our Savior's words in Matthew 7: *"Judge not, that you be not judged. ² For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. ³ Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? ⁴ Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? ⁵ You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye!"*

Reserving judgment, renewing mercy! God help us to that end for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen