

## God, the Advocate Gardener

February 28, 2016

Lent 3C

Luke 13:1-9

I've really been enjoying our experiment with Taize worship this Lent. My first experience with Taize was in Atlanta, years ago, the Cathedral, my church, held a monthly Taize service. The cavernous nave was dark. The only lights were dozens of candles. The simple chants were easy, even for me to sing. The prayers focused us on our basic needs and yearnings. The silence felt expansive in that vast space. I could be at peace.

Taize style worship has spread all over the world in all kinds of Christian communities. The original community, located in the small town of Taize, France, has been a haven for peace and simplicity. This ecumenical brotherhood dedicated themselves to the pursuit of joy, simplicity, and compassion.

So it was such a shock, when about ten years ago, the gentle leader of this community, the beloved Brother Roger, was murdered by a mentally unstable woman. She stabbed to death a frail 90 year old proponent of pacifism for no apparent reason.

Deaths like these disrupt our sense of order and most of us like some order when it comes to death. It helps us feel in control. When tragedy strikes, we often look for someone to blame.

It was depressingly predictable to watch the trajectory of Michael Brown's portrayal in the media. Michael Brown, who was unarmed and gunned down by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri transformed from a promising young man on his way to college to a criminal on the run to finally a demon bearing down on his killer. Well, surely a demon was asking for a bullet. That makes sense. That's justice.

Maybe it's because we're so attached to the idea of cause and effect or probably it just helps us feel safer and more in control when we can connect a tragedy to a behavior. It's sad that he died of AIDS, but he slept around, so what did he expect. She talked back to the police, no wonder she ended up in jail. These kinds of explanations help us feel safe.

This kind of distancing ourselves from tragedy is very, very old. Job's friends engaged in it, to his frustration. And the crowd around Jesus seems to be wandering down that path as well. It's a little unclear in the gospel passage about exactly what they're talking about, but some terrible things have been happening. A group of Galilean pilgrims were killed by Pontius Pilate. Their blood mixing with the blood of the sacrifices they had brought to the temple in Jerusalem. Another group had been killed by a falling tower.

The crowd with Jesus seems to be wondering why this happened. There must be a reason! Jesus responds, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all perish the same as they did."

Do you think that Brother Roger or Michael Brown suffered because they were worse sinners than we? No, I tell you.

Jesus separates sinfulness from the cause of death. But then, in the next sentence, (Luke 13:5) seems to connect punishment and behavior. Sometimes Jesus is really confusing.

Good thing he moves on to a parable. And good thing Jesus talks about the character of God a lot in a lot of other places. The story Jesus tells is about a fig tree. Now fig trees have a complicated history in the gospels. In Mark and Matthew, Jesus curses a fig tree when he is hungry and it has no fruit. But here, the barren fig tree, the tree without fruit has an advocate.

The landowner wants to destroy it. But the gardener wants to give this unsatisfactory and unproductive fig tree more time. He wants to give it some extra attention and nutritious dirt. He refuses to give up on this fig tree!

This is the God Jesus has been telling us about. A God who doesn't give up on us; a God who tends us with extra care when we're drying up.

I don't believe that Jesus is saying that if we don't shape up God is going to drop a tower on us or hand us over to a brutal dictator. That is not the character of the God who heard the cries of slaves in Egypt or so loved the world God came to live with us in it.

I believe Jesus' warning is about the urgency to live our lives. Towers do fall and there is evil in the world. Life is short and we do not have too much time to gladden the hearts of those who travel the way with us. Death is real and unavoidable, so life must be lived.

God, the optimistic gardener, tended the lives of Brother Roger and Michael Brown and cared for them both as precious flowers in the gorgeous garden of this world. And the more we see our fellow brothers and sisters as grace filled vessels that are being tended by a patient gardener, the more we can choose to be co-gardeners, refusing to give up on what looks like dead branches. God invites us to see possibilities in places that seem barren.

There is suffering, there is death. The shadow of the cross hangs over this reading in what seems like clear foreshadowing. Pontius Pilate, who murdered the pilgrim Galileans, will soon be washing his hands of Jesus' death. And as we journey through Lent and towards Jesus' own suffering, we'll be looking for how or if God is present in the darkest hours.

However, in the meantime there is life and the choice about how we will live it. We can, like Brother Roger, commit ourselves to joy, simplicity, and compassion. We can refuse to call young men demons. We can take responsibility for our actions. We can love one another. We

can tend the small shoots of growth we see in ourselves. We can refuse to give up on our own possibilities. I hope St. Mark's can offer you space and time in which to do that. In the simple chants and quiet moments of this morning, I hope you can find space to discern what in your life needs nurture, needs a little extra fertilizer. It is never too late.