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We Are the Tree

Annette Hill Briggs

Luke 13:1-9

[Repent or Perish]

¹³ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ 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? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

[The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree]

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Were he bodily in our midst, someone might ask Jesus about Hitler. Or Sandy Hook. Or Hurricane Katrina. Or the multitude of other megalomaniacs and accidents that strike down human beings without respect to innocence or guilt. We want to know why. If we are the ones in pain, we might demand to know why.

And were he here bodily, Jesus might respond as he already did in Luke 13, by ignoring the question asked, to answer the true question, the relevant question: “What must I do, O God, to be ready for my death?” Because that’s the heart of it, right?

When bad things happen to bad people we are relieved. It fits the worldview we most prefer – the one where people who work hard, follow the rules, wear our seatbelts, don’t smoke, eat our vegetables and go to church... stay safe. But when bad things – terrible, tragic things – happen to good people like us, that world gets tossed. And we also can get sideways and wonder if maybe they had a secret bad life, anything to keep us from giving up the worldview that allows us to control our future. Or, more exactly, pretend that we do.

Take that worldview to church and, some places, one can find preachers to play along. Not here. Not me. Sorry.

Actually, I'm not really sorry. I've found it mostly true that the Lord giveth and taketh away too, and that there's no accounting for why. I very much would have liked for my parents to see my children grow up. "Too bad," saith the Lord. I don't know why. I try not to ask.

I know I'm more blessed than not, so I don't complain. Maybe a tiny bit. We want to know we will be alright once and for always. Until we can once and for all think as Jesus taught us and live as Jesus showed us, we will not understand that we already are. We already are alright.

We shall most certainly die, in ways we can statistically predict. But there are accidents. Nevertheless, we are already... alright.

In his book on the parables Robert Capon makes the point that each one of us is guaranteed only one thing in this life – the one and only thing that no one will ever beg, borrow, or steal from us: death. We each have one. It's the only sure thing each of us has. The one guarantee of our future. And that one thing, Capon says, turns out to be the one and only thing we ever need.¹ And yet: so long as our hearts and minds are tuned to the world instead of the gospel of Jesus, we will ask the wrong questions, cling to falsity, and fear the harmless.

Instead, Jesus told a parable – about a fig tree. All the gospel writers tell this one, each for his own purposes.

In Luke's telling, we are the tree planted where we don't naturally belong, in the midst of God's otherwise well-ordered creation. What IS a fig tree doing in a vineyard? Not making grapes, obviously. Not contributing to the industry of wine-making at all, really. One writer suggests that humanity might have been a divine hobby of God... like a pet, acquired for companionship, because it was cute and fun to talk on walks. Rather like golden retrievers. Except they turned out to be more *in the way* than fun. Chewing up everything. Pooping everywhere. Or, in the tree's case, making shade but no fruit. More bother than pleasure. The maker was tired of it and decided to cut it down.

"No, wait," says the gardener, "leave it be for a year. I'll dig around it, spread some manure, and we'll see if things change. If there's still no fruit in a year, then cut it down."

I'll do it, Jesus said. What they cannot do for themselves. Dig up and turn over the worldview so deeply rooted in them that real love and joy and peace have been choked

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgement: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985) p.238.

off. I will dig through all that, with a story they cannot fail to see and understand. I will walk straight into a most terrible death, having them watch beginning to end – watch a body be broken and spilled, spread into the earth. (There’s the compost, you see, the humus in the parable.) And then, rise. Rise whole and alive. If they can watch, all the way to the end, they will be free. Free to love. Free to joy. Free to peace.

In the parable the gardener asked for a year. In Luke’s timeline it was a matter of days. In Luke 13 Jesus is already on his way to Jerusalem, for the last time. To make his Passover sacrifice. Just like the Galileans in the story about Pilate.

About your own death, Jesus teaches here: *First and foremost of all, in your thoughts and words and deeds, you have to STOP. Stop keeping score. Stop pretending death only happens to the bad guys. Stop pretending death must be avoided at all costs. And for heaven’s sakes, stop being so afraid of dying. Amend your life (the meaning of repentance); change your mind – to my way of thinking and living. I have done for you what you didn’t – because you couldn’t – do for yourselves. I have made the way from life to death to life again free and clear so that you may live it with all the love and joy and peace you can muster – each of you and all of you in your life together.*

You don’t need to do anything at all – except, as Jesus says here, to let it be. Let it be – that he may have his way with our lives.

Would you pray with me?