

## Sermon Sparkler for Lent Three

Repent or Perish!!!! Some Sundays it would be really satisfying to just go for the jugular like that in a sermon, wouldn't it... Well, maybe today's reading isn't really going for the jugular, maybe there is a greater nuance here than we might first imagine... that Jesus is more than one of those street preachers with judgmental placards and too much cologne.

Jesus' interaction with the question of these particular instances of suffering in his day is both a comfort and a terror, truly scripture can be a two-edged sword!

On one side of the blade, Jesus deals with the common perception that our sin causes suffering. This is found throughout the gospels. Jesus not only heals, but forgives sins, in order to respond to the stigma surrounding those who suffer. Most clearly this is found in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of John, where the question is asked of a blind man, "Did he sin, or did his parents?"

This view of a causal relationship between sin and suffering makes some sense—actions should have consequences after all. It would make the world much easier to understand. Then, if a bad thing happened to you, you'd know it was your fault. It would be easy, but as we all know from our actual experiences in life, it is never that simple. Yes, actions have consequences, but the connections between them are rarely crystal clear.

Here, and in John too, Jesus decouples suffering and sin. This should not be a shock. After all, just look at the book of Job, which is a book all about unearned suffering, in which Job's friends spend dozens of chapters arguing with Job, making the claim that his problems are directly connected to his morals. It ends with God stating to Job's friends, "You haven't spoken of me what is right, as has my servant Job." Jesus says a similar thing, "no those folk weren't extra bad and that's why they suffered."

The other edge of Jesus' statement is less comforting. While he de-links particular sin from suffering, he then goes on to point out a universal need to repent of sin.

Then, if we don't get it the first time, he repeats it, but with a different twist.

On the one hand, God's people, represented as a fig tree, are admonished and told to repent and bear good fruit.

On the other hand, they are offered a reprieve of three years to be cultivated into something pleasing and fruitful.

Fruitful Repentance, this is an ongoing theme, one that connects **Discipleship** and **Generosity** toward **Outsiders**... all three major themes of Luke weaved into this one concept—Fruitfulness!

- ✎ What do you suppose your congregation believes "good Christians" are supposed to believe about suffering? Is it helpful and faithful? If not, how can your preaching today look at suffering in a better light?
- ✎ How is your congregation being called to fruitful repentance? What "manure" has God given you to facilitate this fruitfulness?