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Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
March 24, 2019 Lent 3rd Sunday of Year C Luke 13:1-9

In today's Gospel Jesus asks the people of His day, "Do you think the Galileans praying in the Temple in Jerusalem who were killed by Pontius Pilate were greater sinners than the other Galileans?" And I ask you, "Do you think the Muslims praying in the mosques in the city of Christchurch were greater sinners than the rest of the people of New Zealand?" Again Jesus asks, "Do you think those killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed on them were greater sinners than all the rest?" And again I ask you, "Do you think the people killed when the Twin Towers fell on 9/11 were somehow greater sinners? I think you would say, Of course not.

Many a preacher of various faiths and religious traditions has been tempted to discern in natural disasters and freak accidents the avenging hand of an angry God. It is their answer as to why the innocent suffer. They would suggest that the guilt of the supposedly innocent is only hidden from our eyes; that some kind of Fate winds inextricably through our lives, the hidden seam that mends all apparent contradictions? For them, there is a hidden pattern to events, some balancing "karma" that escapes our understanding? Thus, a vengeful God, anxious to appease an offended dignity, exacts a heavy toll in curse and retribution upon sinner and only seeming saint?

This manner of thinking was an option for Jesus, too, but it was an option He did not take. Jesus attempts no easy answer, no explanation to the problem of evil posed by such tragedies. He would not give his listeners "reasons why," He would give them something more. For any sort of religion that His listeners might look to in order to provide the "reasons why" can never give any real comfort. It would only lead them to hate God and in the end to hate themselves. If Jesus would not give an answer as to why bad things happen to good people, if He would not make sense of the perennial human riddle, " Why me, why us, O Lord," He would show those who had been hurt in the fray of life where they could find the strength and courage to meet the challenge of their afflictions.

Essentially what God asks of us is that we be willing to receive life not with a clenched fist, but with an open palm, and then we shall receive much more; to be willing to accept the randomness of the world that God has made, that accidents do happen; that, in some sense, creation is left unfinished by God, and left to human hands to complete; that God allows Godself to be limited by human freedom, so that human beings are capable of doing evil as well as good. Woody Allen once quipped, "God is an under-achiever," implying that God should have made a better world. But

this is the only world we've got. And to try to flee from its hurts, or to take refuge in illusory fantasies that entrap more than they explain, is to refuse to grow into the kinds of persons that God would have us be. The problem, then, is not our experience of life, but our expectation of life. We think that life should be fair, that life should always make sense. And yet we forget about all the undeserved good that we have received. To live with ambiguity, to muddle through with so many loose ends, with this situation ever so precarious, is the only way in which love and freedom can have any real meaning. There is no fairness then, but there are the possibilities of love and freedom. If there is no suffering, neither can there arise opportunities for compassion for those who suffer.

So, there is a wrong question and there is a right question to ask. The wrong question is, "why is this happening to me;" "what have I done to deserve this;" "how can there be a good God, if this is allowed to happen?" And, there is a right question, "what about life is this experience teaching me;" "how am I being challenged to become something more, now that this has happened?" There is no real answer to the first question, but there is the possibility of a response to the second. We can accept the burden of becoming vulnerable, of being just ordinary human beings with all the accompanying limitations, fears and possibilities; we can accept our human condition as did God in Jesus Christ; and we can turn to God in prayer, not to create a world plastic to our imagination, as if our suggestions to God could redesign the universe, but to pray for strength, courage and hope. And then we may very well find ourselves able to do what we thought we could do just on our own resources.

There is a prayer that we Catholics used to say after Mass some years ago. In that prayer was the line, "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears, we poor banished children of Eve." Here the idea expressed is that life on this side of the grave is basically a punishment for sin; that life is full of pain, and our task is to bear it stoically. The English poet, John Keats, had another way of expressing what life was all about. While suffering from a terminal case of tuberculosis as a young man, he spoke of life not as a "vale of tears," but as a "vale of soul-making"—the idea that our task in life is, somehow to grow from the tragedies, the sufferings, the senseless accidents that assault us. Sure, it is only natural to feel hurt, despair and sorrow when struck by some disaster, but one should not stay lodged too long in that spot. For if I remain stuck in that place in my life, then the evil of that situation is allowed to increase. If I refuse to move on and remain locked in rage or despair; if I refuse to learn from that experience; if I refuse to accept the lifelines of help and support thrown out by others; if I refuse to grow in compassion and identify with the sufferings of others; if I refuse to make the world a better, or safer, or kinder place, then, I am allowing the ultimate tragedy of unredeemed evil to be compounded.

In today's Gospel Jesus uses the example of the people killed by Pilate and by the falling tower not to scare us, but to remind us, not to take things for granted. Our life can change on a dime. He asks us to be aware of the kind of person we are becoming, or have already become. Is that who, is that what I want to be? Life should not be lived on automatic-pilot. Lent is given to us as a time to make a course-correction. That is the significance of the gardener's response to the owner of the orchard. There is still time to change. Take advantage of it.

The faith that brings us here today reminds us that the greatest evil was committed in the death of God's Son on Calvary, but that evil was redeemed by the triumph of Easter Sunday. Our faith gives us the hope that by joining our sufferings to those of Jesus, our pain, too, can be transformed into something of value, worth, and wisdom--either for ourselves or others--when embraced with the same spirit of faith, trust, and love that He displayed. Let us pray for the gift of his Holy Spirit we might be "great-souled," and employ our trials and tribulations not for cursing, but for growth.