

“Facing the Music”  
by Pastor Jefferson Cox  
based on Luke 13:1-9  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent, March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2007

I want you to ponder a question in your hearts for a moment. Is there a connection between sin and suffering? In our Gospel lesson, Jesus makes mention of two disasters, two current events that must have been on the minds of his disciples, that must have been the source of much debate at the time. In the first case, Pontius Pilate had ordered a number of Galileans like Jesus to be killed as they made sacrifices in the temple in Jerusalem. Pilate, understandably, was not well liked for his decision. But at the time a question was raised about the morality of those who were killed. In other words, was their death a punishment from God for a sin that they had committed, even though they were worshipping God at the time and that would make the Romans one of God’s tools? Or were they simply victims of the heathen Romans, but if so why didn’t God protect them even as they worshipped the Lord in the midst of the temple? In the other case, a tower located on the temple mount fell, killing 18 people.

In each case, the people wonder if God was punishing those who were killed. In response to those questions, Jesus does not actually address the question of whether their deaths were a punishment from God or not. Instead, Jesus takes the opportunity to remind them of the universal need for repentance. Don’t wait to later to repent, because you never know when you might die, Jesus tells his disciples. Don’t wait until later to bear fruit, because you never know when God might get tired of waiting for you to do so.

This is a central theme of Lent. It’s time to face the music. We don’t do those things that we should do. We do those things that we shouldn’t. Now I’m sure that you’re aware of that. But still admitting it can be a little hard for us. Many have it in their heads that admitting to a weakness makes us more weak.

As you know, last weekend we were in Buffalo, NY, for the burial and funeral for Jenny’s grandfather, and yes, I meant it in that order. On Saturday morning I led a brief service in the chapel at the cemetery for Jenny’s grandfather and then we proceeded to the graveside for the committal of his ashes. That afternoon we attended the memorial service for Jenny’s grandfather. The pastor of one of Jenny’s cousins who lives in the area and who had met with her grandfather recently officiated at that service.

However, this pastor is a pastor of a non-denominational, non-liturgical congregation. The entire service, apart from comments from Jenny’s mom and uncle, consisted of a sermon. More than one person was uncomfortable with the message, because that pastor chose to talk bluntly about the need of those who were there to repent. He led the congregation in what is known as the sinner’s prayer, starting with “Lord, I know I’m a sinner...” At least one person told me later that they were not ready to pray that prayer at that time and place.

On one hand, I certainly understand why that pastor chose to present that message at that time. In the face of the death of a loved-one, many people think about the eternal in ways that they don’t normally think, and may indeed be more open to consider the message of salvation than at any other time. It makes sense. On the other hand, there’s a fine line between talking to people about salvation when they’re thinking about heaven and taking advantage of people when they’re the most vulnerable.

I found myself resisting his message, just as perhaps some here are resisting my message. I was not willing to allow that pastor to lead me in the “sinner’s prayer.” Was that because I’m stubborn about admitting my own shortcomings, my need for the forgiveness of my sins? I don’t think so. Instead I think my resistance had to do with my sense that the pastor was coming from the perspective in his mind that few people in that room were saved, or that they weren’t sure of Jenny’s grandfather’s salvation. I don’t question my own salvation, because I am convinced on the basis of Scripture that I’ve been saved from my sins, so I didn’t feel a need to follow along with what the pastor was doing in order to be saved, and those of you who have been part of my “Importance of Being Lutheran” studies now how I feel about prayers that come dangerously close to being works that we do to earn our salvation. Also, I have no doubts about Jenny’s grandfather’s salvation, as I know that long ago God claimed him as his own in the waters of Holy Baptism and that God-given faith in the one who died on the cross for his sins lived in his heart to the day he died.

So I understand that it can be hard to hear a pastor start talking about the need for repentance and the need for us to bear fruit. However, ultimately repentance is between you and God. I certainly hope and pray that if there’s a part of your life that needs a change of direction away from the path of sin to the path of righteousness, that you admit to the need for a change and then change it and I urge you not to be afraid to acknowledge before God your issues.

Bearing fruit is also between you and God. Yes, a person who believes in Jesus is supposed to make a positive difference in this world. But I’m also smart enough to realize that I can’t be the fruit police, checking and double checking to see if you’re bearing enough fruit for the Gospel. I also realize that many Christians have it stuck in their heads that bearing fruit means doing something public as part of an officially sanctioned church activity, when it really means making a difference in the course of a normal day often in ways that remain subtle and hidden.

So yes, we’re all sinners and we all need forgiveness of our sins, which is made possible by the death of Jesus on the cross as a final sacrifice to God. And yes, God expects all of us to bear fruit, to make a difference, for the Kingdom of God. But bearing fruit is best done quietly, anonymously, subtly. So instead of the sinner’s prayer, during the prayers of the church I want you to pray about additional ways that you can make a difference in the lives of those around you, additional ways that you can bear fruit for God’s kingdom. That way, whether in good times or bad for us, we can rest assured that we have not been taking our faith and salvation for granted and that we are making a difference in the world with the Gospel of our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.