

Our Gospel reading this morning is challenging, so let's start with that. It has two distinct parts; In the 1<sup>st</sup> part Jesus is responding to people's questions about actual troubling events that have happened. There are Galileans who Pilate murdered, and there were 18 people on whom a tower fell. People then and now want to know, if bad things happen is it because we were bad and are being punished? Does everything happen for a reason? No, Jesus says. There is not causal connection between sin and suffering.

Jesus doesn't leave it at that, though. He goes on to say that even if we aren't punished in life by events, we still need to consider what we do and what we have done and amend our lives as we are able. Not for fear that God will punish us, but to live the happiest, most fulfilled lives we can in the here and now. Yes we will die someday. But we have God's grace now. Let's make the most of the life we've been given before we begin the life eternal.

The second part of the reading is a parable which Jesus tells to illustrate what he was saying. Bad luck seems to have come to the fig tree. Does that mean it should be cut down because it's a bad fig tree? No, it means that the tree needs to be given another chance to bear fruit. The tree cannot work any harder than it already is. Jesus doesn't say to the tree, "Go out and do a better job." In Luke's version of this parable of the fig tree, it doesn't get cursed or condemned. It is given another try, another chance, grace...always more grace.

It's possible to get too tied up in knots trying to wrest every possible bit of meaning from this or any parable. One way to go very wrong with interpreting it is to imagine that the gardener is Jesus and he's pleading to the angry landowner, God, to spare the tree. That would be taking the parable too far as an allegory. God is not looking for every opportunity to cut us down, even if we go through times when we aren't fig producers.

Here is an excerpt of a poem by Billy Collins who has been the US Poet Laureate and New York State poet Laureate. The Poem is called "Introduction to Poetry." He's talking poetry, but it's applicable to parables too:

*I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive...  
I want them to water-ski across the surface of a poem...  
But all they want to do is tie the poem to a chair with a rope and torture a confession out of it.  
They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means.<sup>1</sup>*

So, maybe we can just live with the parable of the fig tree. We do the best we can with what we're given and God's grace will see us through the parable and through life.

I want to talk a little about the passage from Exodus as well. Marilyn Anderson is leading the book group we have for Lent. We are exploring together the book *Rooted* by Lyanda Lynn Haupt. Haupt describes the joy of walking barefoot. And it can be a joy. I just watched my six year old

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<sup>1</sup>Billy Collins, "Introduction to Poetry," *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, Random House, 2001, pg. 16

granddaughter walk barefoot through the snow last week. She spends much of her life barefoot in Hawaii. This was the first time she had seen snow and it looked inviting to walk in it...like the sand she is used to. But she realized pretty quickly that walking in snow is quite a different adventure.

But feeling cool earth, or sand or pine needles under one's feet is lovely even if we don't get to do it every day. It reminds us that the earth is God's creation and it reminds us to be connected to the earth is to be connected to the Holy One. Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her memoir *Leaving Church*:

*"To lie with my back flat on the fragrant ground is to receive a transfusion of the same power that makes the green blade rise. To remember that I am dirt and to dirt I shall return is to be given my life back again, if only for one present moment at a time. Where other people see acreage, timber, soil, and river frontage, I see God's body, or at least as much of it as I am able to see. In the only wisdom I have at my disposal, the Creator does not live apart from creation but spans and suffuses it."*<sup>i</sup>

For Taylor and for us, taking off our shoes, lying on the ground are not daily occurrences. Well, for most of us anyway. We live and work indoors and just get out for a walk or a stroll for a small portion of our lives. But for Moses, being in nature, being close to the earth and sky, was part of his work. If Moses decided to lie down on the earth he would have to be a little careful. It would be fragrant alright. It would be covered with sheep poop. And there he was, just minding his business herding sheep, his vocation at that time in his life, when God suddenly appeared to him. This sign would be hard to miss, a burning bush! After this experience life would never be the same again for him. I wonder if God said to him, "I will now make you herd people for the rest of your life."

Wow, what a parallel with Jesus calling the disciples who used to fish, and he taught them to fish for people for the rest of their lives.

I think too about what people in Ukraine have been called to do. Young men and women have put on uniforms and taken up arms to fight in a ruthless, horrific war that they didn't choose. How many of them would have thought a year or two ago that they would be called to learn how to fire an automatic rifle or use an anti-tank missile launcher. They've been called from their ordinary work-a-day jobs to a battle for their lives and their country.

The situation there is so terrible and upsetting. It seems so meaningless; tearing people down and tearing a country apart. People there have to wear thick boots to prevent them from being hurt by the shards of scrap metal and concrete and glass that cover the good earth. WE know that God wants fig trees in Ukraine to live and thrive. And yet a madman is wreaking havoc that we have a limited ability to stop. Let us continue to pray for peace, give money if we are able to support the efforts of the brave people of Ukraine, and know that war is not God's will. but defending one's home and family is what God calls the people to Ukraine to do today.

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<sup>i</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church*, HarperOne, 2006.