

Get on Board

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Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
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Luke 13:1-17

Jesus is continuing his journey to Jerusalem. Along the way, he chastises the crowds that follow him for their failure to recognize what's happening right in front of them and to get on board with what God is doing through Jesus. And he challenges them to settle this issue before it's too late.

At the same time, some people were there who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. And he said to them, "Do you think that, because they suffered like this, these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Not at all, I tell you. But if you don't repent, you all will be destroyed in a similar way. Or those eighteen — the ones the tower in Siloam fell on and killed — do you think they had it coming more than all the people who live in Jerusalem? Not at all, I tell you. But if you don't repent, you all will be destroyed in the same way.

And he told this parable: "Someone had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. And he came looking for fruit on it, and he didn't find any. So he said to the vinedresser, 'For three years now, I've been coming to this fig tree looking for fruit, and I don't find any. Cut it off! Why should it use up the soil?' But the vinedresser said to him, 'Lord, leave it for this year, too, while I cultivate it and fertilize it. Then if it produces fruit for the coming year . . . But if not, cut it off.'

Now he was teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath. And a woman was there who for eighteen years had been disabled by a spirit. She was bent over, and she couldn't straighten up at all. When he saw her, Jesus called her over, and said to her, "Woman, you have been freed from your disability!" Then he placed his hands upon her, and right away she straightened up. And she began to praise God.

But the leader of the synagogue, angry that Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the crowd, "There are six days on which work is to be done. Come on them to be healed, not on the sabbath day." The Lord said to him, "Don't each of you hypocrites untie your ox or donkey on the sabbath and lead it from its stall to give it a drink? As for this daughter of Abraham, whom satan had bound for eighteen years — shouldn't she be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, everyone who opposed him was put to shame. And all the crowd rejoiced over the wonderful things he was doing.

Children's Story

When I was a boy, my family used to visit Cass, West Virginia, home of the Cass Scenic Railroad.

One time, my brother and I walked down to the railroad yard and saw a big, black steam locomotive sitting on the tracks. The engineer invited us to join him up in the cab. I looked at my brother, and my brother looked at me. Then we climbed aboard.

The cab was dusty with coal and greasy. There were handles and levers and knobs everywhere. A fire roared under the boiler. We loved it!

Then it got even better. A dump truck had driven off the road. And that big, black steam locomotive was going to pull it out of a ditch. And my brother and I could go along for the ride!

The locomotive made its way down the track, belching sooty coal smoke and pure white steam, until it came to the dump truck.

Strong men used a thick rope to tie the dump truck and the locomotive together. Then a steam valve was turned, the gears went into motion, the locomotive moved backwards, and the dump truck rose out of the ditch — as simple as that. It was so cool!

Back at the machine shop, my brother and I climbed down from the locomotive, said thank you, and left for home.

What a great morning we had! It's a good thing we climbed aboard when we had the chance.

Sermon

The details are sketchy. Here's what we know. Some Galileans had gone up to Jerusalem to worship at the temple. Or so it appeared. But Galilee was the home of rebellion, the home of insurrection against Rome. So perhaps these Galileans had come to Jerusalem with more than worship on their minds. Perhaps. Whether it was true or not, Pontius Pilate's security forces closed in on them, and the Galileans — “terrorists,” Pilate called them — were slaughtered as they were presenting their sacrifices. And then there were eighteen people — “innocent bystanders,” we would call them — who died when a tower collapsed on top of them.

Nowadays, of course, we have a standard response to events like these. In Minneapolis on the first of August, an interstate bridge over the Mississippi River collapsed. Cars and trucks plunged into the river. A dozen people died. On the second of August, the editorials began to appear. The collapse was blamed on poor inspections and maintenance. The conclusion? We have failed to maintain our highway infrastructure, and innocent bystanders had paid the price.

That's how we respond to tragedy and catastrophe, looking for material explanations. But things were different in the first century. The tendency then was to blame the victim. The moral mathematics of the time worked this way. When the product of the equation was tragedy, then a key factor in the equation was the sinfulness of the victims. It was a natural conclusion, therefore, that the dead Galileans were “worse sinners than all other Galileans” (v. 2), and that the eighteen dead “had it coming” (v. 4). Of course, we would never think of saying that the victims of the Interstate 35 bridge collapse “had it coming.” Nor, apparently, would Jesus. “Not at all,” he says (vv. 3,5).

But Jesus does more than to reject some particular calculations of moral mathematicians. Jesus rejects moral mathematics altogether. He rejects it as a dangerous distraction. Being occupied with assigning blame is a waste of time, a waste of energy, and a waste of attention. “It's not the time for moral mathematics,” Jesus says. “It's time for repentance!”

To repent, you may recall from some months ago, is to get on board with what God is doing through Jesus. The summons to repentance is a call to embrace the mustard-seed-kingdom, to embrace the Messiah who is on the way to his passion. Jesus is saying, “Forget about overthrowing the Romans or about any other project you may have dreamed up for bringing the kingdom. Otherwise Pilate (and whoever comes next) will spill your blood, otherwise you will be crushed under crumbling masonry when Jerusalem is destroyed.”

The summons to repentance means that the train has pulled into the station briefly, that God is here right now through Jesus, that this is not the time to discuss famous railroad accidents nor to plant trackside bombs to blow up Roman troop trains; rather, it's time to get on board with God is doing through Jesus — now! — because Jesus and only Jesus, Jesus the one right in front of you, is the way to the kingdom. Jesus rejected moral mathematics. It was a dangerous distraction from responding to the summons to repentance.

Jesus also rejected identity politics. You Harry Potter readers will be familiar with the identity politics of the House of Slytherin. Malfoy, Snape, and He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named prize pure magical blood above all. They have nothing but disdain for Muggles and Mudbloods. (Never mind what they think of goblins and giants.) And special scorn and agony are reserved for blood-traitors, who don't put the power and privilege of purebloods above all else.

Jesus — to go back to the real world, and to the first century — Jesus, without rejecting the sabbath itself, rejected the identity politics that went with it in the first century. The gospels record accounts of

several similar stories to today's, all of them dealing with the controversy aroused when Jesus healed someone on the sabbath day.

Here's today's story. Jesus was in a synagogue, teaching (a habit he was soon to break, probably because of rising opposition). There was also a woman in the synagogue who for eighteen years had been tied up in knots, knots that grew tighter and tighter, so tight that she couldn't even look up. Jesus called her over. Jesus pronounced her healed. Then Jesus placed his hands upon her. And she stood up straight for the first time in ages, and she danced in praise of God. Amazing!

Well the leader of the synagogue was furious. Not that he opposed healing. Not that he begrudged the woman her freedom after so many years. But the sabbath came first. The sabbath was one of several non-negotiable ways by which Israel stayed Israel. To turn away from keeping the sabbath was to turn away from being Israel. And nothing was more important than Israel being obediently Israel. So the leader of the synagogue rebuked everyone in the room: "Six days are for healing, not this seventh day!"

But Jesus went deeper than seeing the sabbath merely as a badge of Israel's identity. He invoked the sabbath as a gift of blessing for the people of God. That being so, he said it was entirely fitting that the woman — so long tied up in knots by satan — should be freed on the sabbath.

And he invoked something deeper than Israel's identity. He called the woman a "daughter of Abraham" (v. 16), a more basic identity than to call her a daughter of Israel, an identity with important implications. "Daughter of Abraham" recalls Abraham as the father of many nations, not just the father of Israel. It also recalls the promise given to Abraham that through his descendants all people would be blessed. Abraham was not chosen for his own sake. Abraham was not chosen to be rich and famous and to take vacations with God. Abraham was chosen for the sake of redeeming all creation.

And so Israel had been chosen, Israel had been saved, Israel had been brought into the holy land, not for its own sake, not for the sake of merely being Israel, not for maintaining the purity of its identity. Israel had been chosen in order to be a blessing to all nations. First century identity politics tended to forget that selfless purpose. So Jesus rejected those identity politics. Then he hopped the train to Jerusalem and death, in order to bless the world.

The parable Jesus tells (in the middle of today's text) is a challenge to get on board that train with him. Here's the parable. There's a vineyard, and it's full of . . . what? Grapevines! There's not much difference from one vine to the next. Each vine has broad, green leaves, twining tendrils, and glistening clusters of luscious fruit. But there's a special plant in this vineyard, a fig tree. It's not at all like the grapevines. It differs from them root, branch, and fruit — except this particular fig tree has no fruit. Despite special plans for it, despite special attention, there is no fruit. The owner of the vineyard (and of the fig tree) is about to give up, about to have it cut off, level with the ground. But he's persuaded to give the fig tree one more chance.

The fig tree is Israel. And Jesus is issuing a challenge: "Forget about moral mathematics. Forget about identity politics. You are children of Abraham; bear fruit! You are children of Abraham; bless the nations!"

Bear fruit. Bless the nations. How will they do that? Certainly not by being like the nations, as far as their hopes and dreams and plans and strategies are concerned. Not by being like the nations, but by being a fig tree among grapevines — by humility and justice, by patience and trust, and not by power and politics, nor by force and fear. And Jesus is leading the way, this different way. So the challenge, again, is to get on board with him.

That was Jesus' message to Israel. And it's the basis of the church's message to the world. As Jesus was sent to Israel, the church is sent to the world. So his message to Israel is the basis of our message to the world.

Now, I'm not really sure what this means — not at all. But here, at least, is something that I'm frustrated with and curious about. Why is it that, when the church speaks to the world (which we often

don't do), we tend to speak only in moral and ethical terms? We speak for the poor and against abortion. We speak against the latest war and for markets open fairly to third world cotton farmers. Why don't we speak about Jesus and about the kingdom of God? Why don't we speak about the need for nations and institutions to submit to Jesus, not just in terms of morals and ethics, but in terms of direction and goals, in terms of what and whom they serve? Why don't we call on the United States of America to be unlike all other nations, to abandon reliance on our own power — military power, economic power, cultural power — and to leave our prosperity, even our survival, up to God, while we pursue God's kingdom and God's vision for the world, which are not at all the same as ours? Why don't we call on our local school board, to take another example, to be unlike all other local school boards, to forget about forging cogs for the post-industrial machine and instead to shape students as servants of God?

Why don't we do these sorts of things? Is it because we're loyal to our American identity? Loyal to traditions of separation between church and state? Is it out of historically-grounded fears of religious wars and religious oppression? But would that be the case when the course we propose is one, always, of humility and never about the accumulation of power? Why does the church stick to morality, when Jesus focused on fruitfulness? Why does the church stick to morality, when the universal human calling is to be fruitful in God's garden?

Well, that's some stuff I wonder about. And today's text makes me think that it's not just a subject for idle conversation, that there is an urgency to it (*today* is always a day of decision) — there's an urgency to it. Otherwise too many of us — too many people, too many families, too many cities and towns and nations, too many hospitals, too many schools, too many I.T. centers — too many of us, I'm afraid, if we don't get on board with Jesus, will miss the train that leads to the kingdom of God. That would be more than a pity.