

If Jesus Was Your Pastor

Luke 13:1-9

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What if Jesus was your pastor?

Let's pretend for just a minute that my pastorate at First Baptist Church had come to its end.

(Do not read into this. Do not let your imagination run wild. Do not overindulge this exercise. I am not brushing up my resume. I am not entertaining phone calls from other churches. I am not using sabbatical this summer to look for other positions. I'm going fishing. That's *all* I'm doing this summer.)

Let's pretend — emphasis on the word *pretend* — that my pastorate at First Baptist Church had come to its end. I had moved out of my office. I was no longer leading worship or staff meeting. I was no longer teaching Brown Bag or making you do those weird “Catholic-y” things I do, like Ash Wednesday or Remembrance of Baptism Sunday. *And* I was no longer making hospital visits or home visits or calling to check on you.

And so, you put together a pastoral search team and you set upon them the responsibility of finding the next pastor of FBC. They began meeting faithfully every week to go through the process.

Their first task was to create a church profile that would give a thorough and accurate portrait of our church. Then they crafted a thoughtful and well-worded job description and began circulating it in the right places. They solicited resumes from all over. And then, week after week, they began poring over those resumes trying to discern which candidate was the best fit for this congregation.

And then one day, as they were poring over those resumes, they came across the resume of none other than Jesus of Nazareth. (I told you, this is an exercise in *pretending*.) But let's say it happened: applying here as pastor of FBC was Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah.

Would you hire him? Would you want Jesus to be your pastor? Don't answer too quickly. Give that some serious thought. What if Jesus was your pastor?

We know almost nothing about either of the catastrophic events we just read about in our passage this morning. They are only mentioned here in the gospel of Luke and nowhere else either inside or outside of the Bible.

But apparently some Galileans had pilgrimaged to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices in the Temple and, for reasons completely unknown to us, Pilate had them murdered as

they made their offerings, their own blood mingling with the blood of their sacrifices. It was the stuff of nightmares.

Some people brought that news to Jesus and asked for an interpretation: “What are we to make of this Jesus? Did those Galileans deserve it? Was Pilate the instrument of God’s divine judgment?”

What they really wanted to know was “why?” – “Why, Jesus? Tell us why? If God is all powerful, why would God let this happen unless they deserved it?”

And what does Jesus say? He says, “[Let me ask you a hypothetical question:] Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way that they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; *but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did*” (Luke 13:2-3).

What about that tower, Jesus? The one that fell and killed 18 people? Was it senseless or did they deserve it?

And what does Jesus say? The exact same thing. “Do you think they were worse offenders than everyone else? No! *But unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did*” (Luke 13:4-5).

No words of comfort or concern for the families that lost loved ones. Now words of condemnation for an unjust ruler. Just a warning to repent or you’ll face the same fate.

Seriously, now, think about it. What if Jesus was your pastor?

My former pastor once told me about a horrific scene to which he’d been called. A church member’s grand-baby had been brutally beaten to death by the child’s own father. He was just a toddler – not even three years old. When my pastor pulled up on the scene, blue and red emergency lights flashing all around him, he found the mother to the side standing by an ambulance. She was holding a pillow as if it were her child, and onto that pillow she had pulled her son’s bloodied shirt. She was sobbing, inconsolable, and asking over and over: “Why? Why? Why?”

What if in that moment, my pastor had followed Jesus’ model and had taken her hands and said to her, “I tell you, unless you repent you will perish just as he did”?

Think about it. Think long and hard about it. Would you really want Jesus to be your pastor?

A few years ago, Tornados ran rampant through portions of Alabama. NBC ran a news story about a family that had ten members of the family killed by that tornado that day. Fifty-two year old Cora Jones survived. She had been through a lot recently, herself. A few months earlier, she’d been diagnosed with breast cancer. She’d lost her job and had to move back home, but had gotten through it with the support of her family. But on

that day, she lost ten of them including both of her parents, her brother, a cousin, and a young niece.

As NBC interviewed her, Cora's eyes swelled with tears and she spoke of the crushing grief:

"I just go so many questions, but you know, you don't question the Lord," Jones said, "Just why, why, you know, why? Why this had to happen like this? To everybody that you know and love? At one time? Why?" (Gabe Gutierrez and Elizabeth Chuck, "She lost 10 family members in Alabama tornadoes. 'Just why? Why?'" *NBC News*, March 6, 2019).

Thank God, Jesus wasn't her pastor, otherwise he might have stopped the interview and said, "Cora, I tell you, unless you repent you will perish just as they did."

I just don't think we'd want Jesus as our pastor — at least not the Jesus we encounter in this passage.

What these people were wrestling with is what we have come to call *theodicy* or the problem of evil or the question of why a good God lets bad things happen in the first place. They wanted to know *why* God would let those Galileans suffer that way and *why* God would let that tower kill those eighteen people.

Those who ask the question "Why?" can hardly be faulted. In our passage, they represent the familiar point of view that says: There is a reason for human suffering, and it usually has to do with something with their past, something evil, some hidden sin.

The assumption is that we live in a God-ordained universe of rewards and punishments. And that way of thinking is certainly reflected in our scriptures.

In Deuteronomy 28, we read: "But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then... The Lord will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me."

In Job, his friend Elihu says to him, "Those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of his anger they are consumed" (Job 4:8-9).

In the gospel of John, Jesus' own disciples point to a blind man and say, "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2).

But Jesus just won't entertain that theology. He won't entertain any such notion as the idea that we can tell how great a sinner someone is by how much they might suffer in this life:

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? *No*, I tell you... Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them — do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? *No*, I tell you” (Luke 13:2-5).

No, tragedy is not a good measuring stick for sin. No, illness and accident and death and suffering are not good measuring sticks for sin. Sometimes bad things happen to good people for no sense at all.

Since it was first published over 40 years ago, Rabbi Harold Kushner’s “When Bad Things Happen to Good People” has sold over 4 million copies. Thousands perish by famine in Africa, people are crushed in an earthquake in Haiti, a fire tears through Boulder and destroys homes, a Tsunami hits the coast of Japan and kills hundreds. Where is God? How can a good God still allow bad things to happen to good people like us?

Rabbi Kushner calls it luck. There is good luck or bad — neither of which is dependent upon a person’s goodness or badness. There is simply a kind of randomness to life.

And the thing is, Jesus would agree with Rabbi Kushner — *but* Jesus also had a way of making things personal.

“So you want to know what *they* did to deserve such suffering, huh? Well, if *you* don’t repent, *you* will perish, too.”

Jesus does not buy the idea that there’s a correlation between sin and suffering, but he doesn’t let us off the hook either. He takes advantage of two opportunities that were *believed* to have indicated divine judgment in order to speak of *actual* judgment: “unless you repent, you will perish, too.”

And then he tells them a parable that is clearly about *them*... but we’d be making a mistake if we don’t pay attention, because my guess is that it’s about *us* too.

There was a man who owned a vineyard, and in this vineyard he had planted a fig tree. Now it takes a few years for fig trees to get up to fruit-bearing size, but when this one had, he came looking for fruit on it — first one year, then the next, and then the next, and in none of those years did he find any fruit. So, he said to the gardener, “Cut it down! Why should it continue to use up the ground?”

But the gardener pleaded with him: “Leave it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it, and if it bears fruit — great — but if it doesn’t, well then, you can cut it down.”

The thing is, fig trees, especially those in vineyards, have one purpose. Their sole purpose is to produce fruit.

Did you know that in the Middle East, where they get both late rains and early rains, a fig tree can produce as many as three crops a year. So when the owner of the vineyard says he has come looking for fruit for three years and hasn't found any he means that this little tree has missed nine opportunities to bear fruit.

And fig trees also thrive on neglect. For this gardener to talk about digging around the roots to stimulate productivity, and for him to talk about fertilizing it to encourage growth of fruit, would have been laughable. You didn't baby a fig tree! You just let it go, let it grow, and the fruit would soon bend down the branches (Dr. Jim Sommerville, "Woodman, Spare that Tree!" *A Sermon for Every Sunday*, March 24, 2019).

But not this tree. It has been given the same opportunities as every other fig tree, but has yielded no fruit.

Do you see what Jesus did? He told a story that makes us ask ourselves if we are that tree. He told that makes us look in the mirror and ask if we might just be a tree that's been given every opportunity, but that won't produce fruit.

We are always so quick to point out the sins of others, but Jesus won't let us. He turns our finger back on us and asks, "What about you, little fig tree? Where's your fruit? Unless you repent and change your ways, you will perish just as they did."

Fleming Rutledge was one of the first women ordained as a priest in the Episcopal Church. She tells a story of a woman she calls "Jane:"

"Jane is a woman whose husband and children I used to know pretty well. Although Jane appeared to be a very agreeable person to those who saw her socially at the club or the church, I knew it to be a fact that she made life difficult for her family. She was manipulative, domineering, willful, and unforgiving.

The fact that she had a pleasing personality on the surface just made it worse, because she was used to getting her own way with smooth talk. It was almost impossible to get hold of her to help her see what she was doing; she considered herself a person of superior virtue.

During Holy Week several years ago she said something that, from my point of view, was deeply revealing."

It turned out that it was their church's tradition on Palm Sunday to participate in dramatic readings of the Passion narrative. That year, Jane participated in such a dramatized reading for the first time. As a member of the congregation, representing the crowd, she was supposed to shout, "Let him be crucified!"

"This part of the reading is often a significant moment for those who take part... [and] after the service was over, several of us were standing around at the coffee hour talking

about how moving the service had been. People were especially talking about how they had felt when they shouted, 'Let him be crucified!'

At this point Jane said, with considerable energy, 'I just couldn't do it! I just couldn't say it! I just couldn't say such an awful thing!'"

Fleming says, "I have often thought, since, how terribly sad that was. In her stubborn blindness, Jane could not identify herself as a sinner like the rest of us" (*Bread and Wine*, 78).

The reality is that we can't repent if we can't see ourselves as sinners.

Jesus' parable is meant to take the blinders off, to help us point our judging fingers back at ourselves and to ask clearly and candidly: "What fruit do I bear?"

Interestingly, the parable doesn't end with the owner's order to cut it down, does it?

Somebody stands between the fruitless fig tree and the owner's ax. The gardener asks for more time. "I'll work the soil. I'll fertilize it. I can't make it produce fruit, but I can give it the opportunity."

Barbara Lundblad says, "Jesus is the gardener, isn't he? He refuses to give up on those who are living in the vineyard. Maybe the vineyard is the whole earth. Maybe it's the church. Maybe it's your life and mine. Jesus isn't giving up on you, me, the church, the whole earth. There's hope in this parable — don't cut the tree down. But there's also urgency — give me one more year" ("Could This Be the Year for Figs?", *Day 1*, March 18, 2001).

Paul Simpson Duke says that this parable reminded him of a prayer one of his deacons used to pray. Whenever it was his turn to pray publicly, this deacon would say, "Lord, we thank you for sparing us another day." Paul said that he didn't like that prayer at first. It painted the picture of an angry God, with a thunderbolt in his hand, poised and ready to strike us dead.

But after spending some time with this parable, he changed his mind. Here is the owner of the vineyard, ready to cut us down and make room for a tree that will bear some fruit, and here is our Lord, intervening on our behalf, standing between us and our fate, begging for more time.

Thank God that Jesus isn't our pastor. We need Jesus to be something more than our pastor. Thank God he is instead the gardener who ensures that we've been "spared another day."

But spared for what?

Not to use up ground, but to bear fruit.

Amen.