The Gardener

Luke 13:1-9
March 11, 2007
Third Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Leanne Pearce Reed
Montevallo Presbyterian Church

You can see the Las Casitas volcano in Nicaragua rising up in the distance miles before you get near the base. I was there in the summer of 1999, just a few months after Hurricane Mitch swept through Central America. Las Casitas, like many inactive volcanoes in the region, used to have a lake in the crater at the top, and small communities dotting its sides. When Mitch arrived with its heavy rains, that lake filled and then overflowed, weakening one edge of the crater until it collapsed. The mudslide that ensued killed more than two thousand people. When I visited, even from a distance we could see the gash along the side of the volcano that marked the path of the mudslide, gaping like a still-open wound.

I was spending the day with Presbyterian mission workers who provided counseling and social services for the survivors of the mudslide. We traveled to a small school not far from Las Casitas where the survivors were housed in a temporary camp. In small groups, the survivors were invited to share their experience of the hurricane and mudslide in words or by drawing pictures. All of them had lost multiple members of their family and many friends and neighbors. Some had lost forty or fifty members of their family or more in one devastating moment. Following the hurricane, many preachers in the area tried to make sense of the catastrophe by interpreting it as God's punishment for the people's sin. For the survivors, then, trauma and loss was compounded by an oppressing guilt. They wondered why their loved ones had died and they had survived. They catalogued their sins – drinking, smoking, adultery – and wondered what they had done to cause the mudslide.

I kept silent most of the day. The language barrier wasn't the problem – my Spanish was adequate, but perhaps my theology was not. I did not believe God caused the hurricane or the mudslide, certainly not as punishment. But I did not know how to speak of a gracious and forgiving God to someone who had just lost fifty members of her family. I suspected that words could not penetrate such pain, not yet anyway. And so I listened and played with the children and prayed.

It's easy enough to condemn those preachers who were so quick to blame a vindictive God, just as we rejected Hank Erwin's suggestion that Katrina was God's punishment for the sins of New Orleans. And yet faced with disaster, we all long for an explanation. We may not blame God for the tragedy, but we want to be able to blame something, to know that these disasters aren't as random and capricious as they seem. We hear about a car accident and we wonder if they were wearing their seatbelt. Someone gets cancer and we ask if they were a smoker. We want to figure out *why* the disaster

struck, as if that knowledge can somehow insulate us from it. We want to reassure ourselves – I don't smoke, I don't live in a floodplain, I wear my seatbelt and get my cholesterol checked and eat oat bran for breakfast – this can't happen to me. We want an explanation that will keep the disasters at bay.

Perhaps that's what Jesus' questioners were looking for in our gospel reading this morning – some kind of explanation. As Jesus is teaching, some listeners mention a recent tragedy, a story straight from the headlines of the day: a group of Galilean pilgrims were killed by the troops of Pontius Pilate right in the Temple so that their blood "mingled with their sacrifices." But Jesus immediately dismisses the notion that sin and punishment had anything to do with the event: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" No. And before anyone else can bring it up, Jesus himself mentions another recent disaster – what about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? Were these worse than anyone else living in Jerusalem? Again, the answer is no.

Jesus rejects the connection between sin and suffering – and yet he offers no alternative explanation in its place. He speaks of the two tragedies -- one caused by human oppression, the other by natural disaster – and offers not comfort, but warning, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

It is discomforting moment, one I would just as soon gloss over on my way to some easier good news. We want an explanation, something we can wrap our minds around to help us understand why these tragedies happen. But Jesus doesn't offer that kind of comfort. Instead he invites his listeners – and us – to sit with our discomfort and our fear. He invites us to face the reality of our world – a world in which innocent pilgrims are killed, towers fall, villages are washed away, tornadoes strike, and people we love fight cancer and other illnesses. In this moment, Jesus serves as a mirror for us, an unflinching reflection, and when we look in that mirror what we see is our frail flesh, our fragility. We see our mortality.

Thomas Lynch is a writer, poet and funeral director, or "undertaker," as he puts it. In his book of essays, *The Undertaking*, he tells about the business of funeral homes. The market, he explains, is figured on what is called the *crude death rate* – the average number of deaths out of every thousand persons. In his part of the country, the rate is 8.4 – out of every thousand people, every year 8.4 will die – many of them old, some of them children, from cancer or heart disease or car accidents. But the figure "most often and conspicuously missing from the insurance charts and demographics," he writes, "is the one I call The Big One, which refers to the number of people out of every hundred born who will die. Over the long haul, The Big One hovers right around…well, dead nuts on one hundred percent. If this were on the charts, they'd call it the *death expectancy rate* and no one would buy futures of any kind. But it is a useful number," he says, "and it has its lessons."[1] This is the number that Jesus is asking his listeners –

and us – to sit with for a little while, as uncomfortable as it is: this 100% death expectancy rate, the knowledge that every one who is born will also die.

In the life of the church, the season of Lent in particular is a time for reflecting on that knowledge of our mortality. The season begins with Ash Wednesday. In worship on that day, we offer our repentance to God and receive the sign of the cross in ashes on our foreheads. The ashes are meant to serve as a reminder of our mortality. As they are imposed, we hear the words: "Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return." Someone recently told me the story of a young pastor in her first call who was preparing for her first Ash Wednesday service at her church. In the late afternoon, she realized they had no ashes for the service. Traditionally, the ashes come from the burning of the palm leaves from the previous Palm Sunday. She dug around in the church until she found the dried palm leaves, went home to the manse next door and fired up the little hibachi grill on the patio, and added the palm leaves. The leaves burned up in a flash and the ashes scattered in the wind. Apparently experienced makers of ash know that the best method is to slowly bake the palm leaves in a low oven until they dissolve into ashes that are easy to collect. But by now she was out of palm leaves and out of time. The service was soon to start, and still she had no ashes. Determined not to appear as an incompetent novice pastor, she hastily came up with an alternative. The toner powder from the copy machine, she decided, was about the color and consistency of ashes. It would do. That year, the members of her church received the sign of the cross and wore the symbol of mortality on their foreheads that Ash Wednesday – and for several days thereafter, until the copy toner finally wore off.

Perhaps we would be better served that way, to walk around with a more permanent reminder of our mortality marked on our foreheads. For Jesus confronts us with the uncomfortable fact of our fragility not to frighten us or depress us, but to remind us: Life is a gift.

His discomforting warning still ringing in their ears, Jesus tells his listeners a parable, a story about the owner of a vineyard who had planted a fig tree. For three years, the owner had come looking for fruit and found none. Finally he told the gardener to cut the tree down. Why waste the soil on a tree that would not bear fruit? But in a scene of infinite tenderness and patience, the gardener replied, "Let's give it one more year. I'll tend it and nourish it and see if it bears fruit."
John the Baptist said the axe lay poised at the root of the tree, ready to strike. But in Jesus' parable, the gardener stays the axe, saying "Let's give it one more year." And the year that Jesus proclaimed, "the year of the Lord's favor," would be a year of forgiveness, restoration, second chances.

Life is a gift. There are no guarantees. There is no counting on next year or next week or even the next hour. Every year of life is a mercy. It is a gift from the patient and loving God who is willing to give us a little more time. When we realize this, we start to live differently. That's the true meaning of repentance, I think. Repentance is not a

one-time deal, or something we do just on Ash Wednesday or in the season of Lent. It is a way of life. It is a way of turning to God in gratitude when we realize that life is not our own, but a gracious gift from God.

Revival preachers like to ask, "If you were to die tonight, do you know where you would end up?" This passage asks us something different. It asks how would you live if you were given one more year, just a short time to make up for wrongs done and opportunities missed? The parable of the fig tree challenges us to live each day as a gift from God.

Hugh Prather reflected on this during an illness his wife suffered. One dark night, as she slept by his side, he wrote:

> *She may die before morning. But I have been with her for four years! There is no way I could feel cheated if I didn't have her for another day. I didn't deserve her for one minute, God knows.*
>
> *And I may die before morning.*
>
> *What I must do is die now. I must accept the justice of death and the injustice of life. I have lived a good life – longer than many, better than most. Tony died when he was twenty. I have had thirty-two years. I couldn't ask for another day. What did I do to deserve birth? It was a gift. I am me – that is a miracle. I had no right to a single minute. Some are given a single hour. And yet I have had thirty-two years.*
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> *Few can choose when they will die. I choose to accept death now. As of this moment, I give up my "right" to live. And I give up my "right" to her life.*
>
> *But it's morning. I have been given another day. Another day to hear and read and smell and walk and love and glory. I am alive for another day.* [2]

Friends, we have been given the gift of life this day. How will we use it? Amen.

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[1] Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: Penguin, 1997) 4-5.
[2] Hugh Prather, from *Notes to Myself* as quoted by John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing Through Grief*, rev. ed. (New Orleans: Insight Press, 1995) 94-95.