

Repent!

Luke 13:1-9

Self-righteous anger. If emotions were cuisine, this would be the *pièce de résistance*, the dish we love to linger over and return to, time and time again. Anger by itself does not taste so good. It is bitter and leaves an aftertaste. On the other hand self-righteousness—there is the seasoning that makes plain anger irresistible. Self-righteous anger goes down smoothly. It makes us feel superior. It elevates us above lesser mortals, not to mention our enemies. So long as we have it on our plates, the confusing grayness of the wearisome world goes away. It is refreshingly clear that we are the good guys and those others are the bad guys. If all this were not enough, self-righteous anger also reheats wonderfully; it tastes almost as fine the second or fifth or sixtieth time out of the oven.

Jesus was hanging out with his fellow Galileans, his home folk, his people. In these neighborly circumstances, they served up some self-righteous anger. They told him "about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1). This was something to be angry about. It was bad enough to be occupied by Pilate and his Roman minions when they did not commit atrocities, but here was an occasion—have you heard?—when he sent soldiers into the sacred precincts of the temple and had men—our countrymen!—cut down like lambs to the slaughter. No, not simply *like* lambs to the slaughter, but *alongside* sacrificial, slaughtered lambs, so that the blood of holy sacrifices and patriots ran together as one. What could possibly be more violent, more unforgiveable, more deserving of condemnation? What could more clearly set Jesus' audience apart from true wickedness of the Romans?

During World War I, dread stories about the Germans slithered back to the home fronts of those who opposed them. The Hun soldiers were so inhuman that they tossed enemy infants into the air and bayoneted them, it was said. Before the United States militarily ousted Iraq from Kuwait in 1993, Congress heard stories that Iraqi soldiers invaded hospitals and—out of pure malice—removed newborn babies from incubators, leaving them to die on cold tile floors. Both of these stories turned out to be falsehoods, but atrocity stories are often used to fuel martial fury and vengeance. Those who questioned them at the time, who wanted sources checked, were accused of national disloyalty.

We have no way of knowing whether or not the atrocity story the Galileans told Jesus ever happened. What is clear is that it was an appeal to Jesus' nationalistic sympathies. He was expected to hear the story and galvanize in heated moral superiority with his countrymen, very much against the outsider Romans, those inhuman forces of evil. However Jesus did not go along with their plans. He did not focus on Pilate or the Romans and their cruelty. Instead, he turned attention back on his countrymen. Those Galileans that you say so suffered at Pilate's hand, do you think "they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" What about those from among us who were innocently building a tower at Siloam, and died when it crashed? Were they any worse than others who were not crushed? Jesus responded to those questions: "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did" (vv. 2-5).

Jesus did *not* tell his countrymen that the occupying Romans were the personification of goodness, or that their oppression was anything other than oppression. However he did not support his audience in defining their enemies. He did not partake of self-righteous anger with his fellow Galileans. He confronted those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt" (18:9). When it came to judging sin, it is best to look for the log in your

own eye before searching for the speck in your neighbor's ([6:37-42](#))—or maybe even your enemy's.

We live in a day—not so unlike that of the atrocity-rumoring Galileans—when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Christians blame Muslims and Muslims blame Christians. Fundamentalists blame Hollywood, the ACLU, and homosexuals. Liberals blame fundamentalists, militarists, and pharmaceutical companies. For those affected by the Flint water crisis; we blame the governor, the emergency city manager, or the people who installed the lead pipes. So we know the blame game! Amid the din, Jesus says, "Hold on. Think about a homely old fig tree. One that has not borne much fruit for a long time. The farm owner says, 'Cut that damned tree down.' His head gardener says, 'First, let me aerate the soil around it and throw some manure on the poor thing. After that give the tree one more year, and if does not produce, chop it to the ground'" (see [Luke 13:6-9](#)).

So, just when we begin to stir up flattering, heroic images of ourselves in full battle dress, ready to wipe evil off the face of the earth, Jesus knocks us off our moral high horses. He brings us down to earth and back to ourselves, with talk of fertilizer and a scruffy tree. He says, "Ask yourself if you are like that fig tree. Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space?" **Rodney Clapp**

In order for Jesus to impress his point upon his audience, he needed to address an apparent misconception held by his listeners and many of us. With respect to questions of sin and suffering, a common assumption among the people of Israel was that those who experienced pain and affliction were being punished by God, either for their own sins or for those of their ancestors.

Jesus taught like Paul in his Letter to the Romans: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" ([Rom. 3:23](#)). Due to the sin of one man in the garden, *all* are now subject to divine judgment, which Jesus has come to announce in no

uncertain terms. Jesus said we all need repentance, *metanoia*, a complete turning away from former beliefs and actions in faithful acceptance of the proclamation of God's kingdom in the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is the hope offered in Jesus' parable of the Fig Tree. The fig tree is reflective of the apathy and indecision that was widespread among those who heard Jesus' message.

Our master comes to the vinedresser looking for results from his fig tree, which in its barrenness is just "wasting the soil." The tree, however, has an advocate in the gardener, who is willing to provide the special attention it needs in order for it eventually to be productive. The gardener pleads with the owner to grant the tree one more year of life. "Far from offering cheap grace, or forgiveness with no reckoning, the gardener advocates that every chance... be given before a final decision is made." The owner agrees and grants the reprieve. Paul reminds us that we: "are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). Yet the gift is not without its price, as Jesus indicates in his emphasis on repentance. It is the gardener who allows for the possibility of fruitfulness, first by pleading his case to the owner of the field, and then by his constant care, digging around the roots, and applying manure.

Augustine was clear on the symbolic importance of manure: "[It] is a sign of humility." The essence of repentance is: the faithful affirmation that "while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). The manure around our roots is the very blood of the one who pleads for our justification before God, the one through whom we may offer up the fruits of the kingdom to our Creator. The very humility of Christ, who "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,... [who] humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8). **Daniel G. Deffenbaugh**

God is the master. Jesus is the Gardner. We are the fig tree. Jesus instructed us to turn to God in submission. It is not by our goodness or righteousness, but through Jesus' great work and sacrifice that we have a right relationship with God.

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