

### Cut Down That Fig Tree!

Why do bad things happen to good people? People have been asking that question since, well, since the dawn of time. Because bad things sometimes happen to good people. Children sometimes get cancer, like Isaac, an eighth grade student of my daughter Madeline, who recently was diagnosed with Leukemia. What did he do to deserve that? Commercial airliners sometimes crash, such as the 737 Friday before last in Ethiopia, killing all 157 on board. We want to know who or what to blame. The mechanics who worked on the plane? Boeing, the company who built it? The pilots who were flying it that day? And by the way, who do we blame for Isaac's leukemia? Does that blame go all the way to the top?

In 1981, a Jewish Rabbi by the name of Harold Kushner wrote a best-selling book entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Maybe some of you have read it. The thesis of the book is that the God worshipped by Jews and Christians alike is a good and loving God, and is with people when they suffer, but that doesn't mean that God prevents suffering. That's not the way God works. Suffering is a part of life. Kushner's own son Aaron died at the age of 14 from an incurable disease, so Kushner knew first hand about suffering. But that didn't stop his book from being criticized by some. Isn't God supposed to be omnipotent, unlimited in power and able to do whatever God wants?

To these critics we say, why would God answer some prayers for healing, but not others? My wife Lois' father Jerry died of cancer at the age of 48. While he lay in the hospital, a member of his former church, Calvary Mennonite, visited him and told him that he must not be praying enough. Jerry essentially told her to leave and to never come back.

And of course, there are some, and always have been some, who believe that suffering is the consequence of sin. That people do indeed deserve the suffering they experience. In the Gospel of John, Jesus and his disciples meet a man who had been born blind. And Jesus' disciples asked him, Who had sinned? That man, or his parents? To which Jesus replied, neither. That man had been born blind in order that the power of God might be made manifest.

And then in today's text, some unnamed people who were hanging around with Jesus brought up an apparently recent tragedy in which a group of pilgrims from Galilee had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices in the temple. And while they were in the temple, the Roman Governor Pilate (remember him?) had had these Galileans slaughtered. It was a horrific act, and Pilate was clearly the one to blame. But Jesus sensed that these people in the crowd assumed the Galileans must have done something to deserve what happened, that they must have been "worse sinners" than all the others in the temple that day. To which Jesus replied, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Then Jesus reminded them of another recent tragedy in Jerusalem in which a tower had collapsed, killing eighteen people. Jesus asked those in the crowd, "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." In other words, we are all sinners in need of repentance, and no one is a worse sinner than anyone else.

On Friday March 15 gunmen in a town in New Zealand ironically named "Christchurch" entered two separate mosques and killed 50 people. Was it because they were Muslim? Did they deserve to die? Were they "worse sinners" than anyone else in Christchurch that day, say, worse than the Christians who lived in the same town? Clearly, the real sinners that day were the

gunmen who did all the shooting, right? Of course, some blame surely must go to the manufacturers of the assault-style weapons used in the attacks, not to mention the dealers that carelessly sold them. You may have heard on the news that soon after the shooting, the Prime Minister of New Zealand announced a national ban on all military-style assault rifles. I say, good for her. Do we need a similar ban in the U.S.?

You also may have heard on the news in the last couple of days that nineteen year old Sydney Aiello, who survived Parkland High School shooting but whose best friend was killed, took her own life last Sunday. What makes this even more tragic and horrific, she shot herself in the head. What was she doing with a gun?

This past Thursday, Aleen Ratzlaff, Deryll and Jan Amstutz joined Lois and me at a presentation at Hesston Mennonite Church by internationally known speaker Shane Claiborne, on the topic of gun violence, and converting guns into garden tools. He and a colleague even demonstrated how to do that: while we watched on live video, they went outside, and literally pounded and reshaped a shotgun into a garden tool. And while they worked, Adam Miller, who of course is Doug and Holly's son, and who was wounded during the shooting at Excel Industries in Hesston, shared his story. It was gripping and profound. And guess what? The weapon used by the gunman was an assault rifle. So yes, let's blame not just the shooter, but the gun manufacturers and sellers. And while we're at it, let's condemn the culture that promotes and provokes gun violence.

Not so fast, we can hear Jesus saying. They are no worse sinners than anyone else at Excel that day. No worse than anyone in the entire town of Hesston. That shooter, Jesus would say, was no greater a sinner than us. What would we say to that?

At the Shane Claiborne lecture, Ryan Bartel, one of Adam Miller's co-workers who had also witnessed the shooting (and Doug and Pam Bartel's son, I just found out!) shared about his experience. He imagined himself in the shoes of the shooter, and tried to imagine how desperate and afraid he must have felt when he had learned earlier that day that he would never be allowed to see his kids again. Wow! That's exactly the kind of empathy and honesty and humility Jesus calls us to embrace in today's text.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He told this strange parable about a fig tree that hadn't born any fruit for three years, because of which the owner told the gardener, "Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?" But the gardener very calmly and wisely suggested that the owner let it alone for one more year, to give him time to dig around it and put some manure on it. If all goes well it will bear fruit next year. But if not, then we can cut it down.

When we add this parable to the exchange that preceded it, here is what we get. We are all sinners. None of us is a worse sinner than anyone else. The Galileans were no worse sinners than the Jerusalemites. Pilate was no worse a sinner than the people he had slaughtered. The shooters in New Zealand were no worse sinners than everyone who heard about it on national news (much as I might like to disagree with this). The manufacturers and sellers of assault rifles are no worse sinners than the people who call for their abolishment (and I am one of those). God calls us not to cast angry blame for all the bad things that happen to good people—not to accuse, nor to judge, nor to find fault, nor to point our finger at others. Because quite frankly, that is not our job. God calls us to give others second chances, and to take responsibility for ourselves. To repent from our own sins.

But as an important part of our repentance, God calls us to turn around, reverse direction, and bear fruit for God's kingdom of justice, peace, and mercy. As individual disciples and followers and fig trees. And, as a church, the very body of Christ. Are we at First Mennonite on

the corner of Grand and Ash in Hillsboro Kansas bearing fruit like we should? If not, no need to cut us down just yet. It may be that all we need is for the gardener to dig around a bit, stir things up. I hope we all like the smell of manure. [Take a deep breath...]

Holy Jesus, the light of your love is shining, in the midst of the darkness. Set us free by the truth you now bring us. Shine, Jesus, shine. Fill this land with the Father's glory. Flood the nations with grace and mercy. Send forth your word, and let there be light.