

Luke 13:1-9

Dr. Justo L. González

The logo for AETH (Association of Evangelical Theologians and Hermeneutists) features a stylized 'A' composed of several overlapping triangles in shades of yellow and pink. Below the 'A' is the word 'AETH' in a light grey, sans-serif font.

AETH

© Justo L. Gonzalez

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>
info@aeth.org

Luke 13:1-9

There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." And he told them this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on it and found none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?' And he answered him, ' Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The text that has been read is one that most of us avoid because it raises a number of thorny questions, particularly the age-old question of why do human tragedies occur. When tragedy strikes, the first question we ask is, Why? Why did my child have to die? What evil had he done? Was it perhaps for some evil I did? Why does famine strike in Africa? Is it perhaps because of some particular sinfulness of the Africans or their leaders? Why does a tidal wave sweep away thousands in Bangladesh? These are all questions that it is quite natural to ask and impossible to answer. And that is one of the reasons why we tend to stay away from this passage in the Gospel of Luke.

The other reason is that the passage does not answer those questions. Jesus does not give us, as we would like, a ready-made answer that we could give to the mother whose teenaged son has just died in an automobile accident, like a doctor prescribing a drug for a patient. Rather, all

that he does is to tell us that a certain answer is wrong, and then he moves on to tell us that such tragedies, unexplainable and mysterious though they may be, are a call to obedience. Let us look more closely at the text. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and he has been speaking about what it means to be a faithful people. In that context, someone comes and tells him of a gruesome crime that Pilate has perpetrated. He has mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. In other words, he has killed them just as they were offering their sacrifices to God. The details of what had taken place are not altogether clear. But several things are clear.

The first is that this terrible crime took place in the Temple, for this was the place where the Galileans would have come to offer sacrifices to God.

The second is that, precisely because it had taken place in the Temple, it was a most horrible crime. It was not only murder but also sacrilege. One may well surmise that many Jews were reminded of the event, several decades earlier, when Pompey rode his horse into the holy of holies. Or that other time, many years earlier, when the Temple was destroyed and the people led into captivity. We certainly are reminded of the murder of Becket before the high altar in the cathedral of Canterbury, or more recently, of the murder of Mons. Oscar Romero under similar circumstances in a church in San Salvador.

Thirdly, what becomes clear when we read the entirety of the Gospel is that there was a great deal of animosity on the part of some of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem towards all Galileans. Indeed, many Jews viewed the Galileans as second-class Jews, as standing somewhere between the true Jews and the heathenish Gentiles.

For all these reasons those who are telling Jesus of Pilate's crime are raising several questions in one. They are raising first of all the question of the reason for such seemingly meaningless suffering. Secondly, they are raising the question of whether good Jews should not be incensed at Pilate and all the Romans. In other words, as in so many other places in the Gospel narrative, they are trying to place Jesus in the difficult position of having to appear either unpatriotic or subversive. If he condemns Pilate's act, he will be accused of inciting rebellion against the Romans. If he plays down its importance, his listeners will be outraged at his religious and human insensitivity. Finally, they are raising the question of the relations between Galileans and other Jews. In telling him of the horrible thing that has happened to these Galileans, they are raising the commonly held belief among Jews that Galileans were less faithful than other Jews. Perhaps this is the reason why Jesus responds: Do you think that these particular Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans? And then he sharpens the question by bringing it closer to home and referring to an incident in Jerusalem: Those 18 upon whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?

To me this entire text is particularly poignant because I have lost count of the number of times when, speaking to someone about the famine in Africa, I have heard the response that Africans are suffering from famine because of their sin. I do agree that famine is the result of human sin. But upon reading this text, I wonder if Jesus wouldn't have responded with something like: Do you believe that those Ethiopian children who have starved to death were worse sinners than the rest of Ethiopia, worse sinners than the ruthless and uncaring government under which they lived? Or those seven who perished in the explosion of the Challenger, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others?

When we put the matter in such terms, it is clear that whatever we say about the suffering of those far away must be consistent with what we are ready to say about the tragedies that strike closer to home, and even about our own suffering.

But then Jesus carries the matter one step further and shows that we are posing the question in the wrong way. The surprising thing is not that so many die. The even more surprising thing is that we still live. Twice he says: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." And then he illustrates his meaning with a parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser: Lo, these many years I have come seeking fruit in this fig tree, and I find none. And then ensues a conversation with the outcome that the owner of the vineyard agrees that for one more year the tree will be left to

stand. It will even receive special care. But if at the end of that time it has not produced fruit, it shall be cut down.

What does the parable mean, in this context? It clearly means that those of us who survive, those Galileans who were not killed by Herod, or those Jews on whom the tower did not fall, are living only by the grace of God, and that our continued life is for the purpose that we bear fruit.

It also means that even our apparent blessing and abundance are not necessarily something of which we should boast. The tree that has produced no fruit receives special attention and added fertilizer, not because it is so good, but rather because it is so poor.

I said at the beginning that I do not particularly like this text. And this is the final reason why I don't like it. I would like to think that the reason why I have a comfortable house, a substantial income, and a healthy body is that I have somehow been particularly faithful. This text, however, leads me to think otherwise. Could it be, could it just be, that the reason why I have been given all these advantages is that otherwise I would have great difficulty bearing fruit? It is a question I must ponder, a question that I invite you to ponder in the days ahead.

And what is a question for us as individuals and as families is also a question for us as a church and as individual congregations. We tend to think that the fact that a church has many resources at its command is a sign that it has been faithful. But this parable raises the question -- just the question-- that it may really be otherwise. I have seen very poor churches, both in this country and overseas, churches with no social prestige, churches with no buildings, where one can breathe the Spirit of God, and where one can taste the fruits of mercy and justice. And I sometimes wonder -- I just wonder-- could it be that our own wealth of resources has been given to us in an effort to lead us to bear fruit, to share those resources, to share of ourselves, and that the reason we survive is not our great budget, our nice music, our fine sermons, our beautiful buildings, but this miraculous grace of the owner of the vineyard who has decided to give us one more chance?

I don't know. But this parable causes me to wonder . . .