

“When Bad Things Happen to Good People: There’s Always Next Year!”

Luke 13: 1-9

Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

March 24, 2019

You may recall the best-selling book entitled “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”, written by Rabbi Harold Kushner. Inspired by the illness and death of his teen-aged son Aaron, Kushner’s book created a sensational response by both Jews and Christians in the 1980’s, and among people of any faith who thought about God’s role in the routines and events of earthly life.

Kushner had always considered the world to be a fair place, under the control of an all-powerful God who could intervene in daily affairs, awarding good and rebuking evil. In wrestling with his son’s untimely death, though, Kushner came to accept that God does not meddle by fiat in human affairs. Rather, God has trusted human beings with free will. God does not command or control us, nor can God prevent people—good people, or bad people, or people in between—from experiencing disappointing results, interminable suffering, or tragic death. NCAA brackets will be busted, swollen rivers will flood fertile farmland and peaceful towns, unsuspecting passengers and pilots will die in air disasters.

So what might we expect of God, if God is not going to prevent bad things from happening to good people? Kushner reminds us that God wisely created a world that is orderly—thank you!—with natural laws that do not change. God does not arbitrarily choose one outcome over another. Every human being will have to deal with hardship sometime in life. God’s role is to provide encouraging strength and comforting support during our difficult times. Tomorrow’s sun will dry today’s tears. There’s always next year!

In Jesus’s “Parable of the Unfruitful Fig Tree”, which appears only in the Gospel of Luke, that is what the gardener pleads with the vineyard owner: “There’s always next year”! “Perhaps the tree has

disappointed you so far, but give it one more chance!" "If it is properly cared for and lovingly nurtured, then we'll see what might happen!" "Just don't give up hope yet!"

The "fig" has the distinction of being the first fruit mentioned in the Bible, in the Book of Genesis. From the oppressive heat of ancient culture, a healthy fig tree provided welcomed shade. In the growing season, its fruit often appeared before its leaves. Strings of dried figs were tasty sustenance for a traveler. So, frustration with a barren, unproductive fig tree would be understandable. Especially if it had three seasons--three opportunities--to live up to expectations, and had failed miserably every time. How many more chances did it deserve?

So, what is Jesus's point? It is this: Just as an unfruitful fig tree will be destroyed if it does not take advantage of another chance, so those who ignore the allotted time for repentance will perish. And before telling the parable itself, according to Luke, Jesus cites two examples proving his point: Galileans killed by Pilate while they were worshipping, and eighteen people killed in Jerusalem by a toppling tower. Were these acts of God, punishing people for their sins?

No! There are no satisfying explanations for such tragedies, but they point us to the reality that we live in a world in which we are not in control. And they constitute a call to repentance. We are advised to avoid trying to explain a rationale for the evils of life, and rather instead to view such calamities as evidence of the fragility of life. Anyone, good or bad, could find himself or herself facing final judgement suddenly, without advance warning. Jesus's call to repent is the critical decision of anyone's life. Repentance is the bearing of good fruit! God is interested in lives that produce deeds of justice and compassion. How many chances do you want?

Jesus's call to repent is not about instilling a general feeling of remorse about how bad our lives have been, that is, how bad we may have individually or corporately behaved. It is rather about discerning the times in which we live, being accountable for the fix in which we find ourselves,

comparing its faults to the perfection of God's original idea, and boldly finding our way back to God while we have the chance! Are we bearing the fruits of justice and compassion that are in concert with God's intentions on earth?

In 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, 20 children and 6 adults—all good people--died by the barrel of a Bushmaster AR-15 semiautomatic rifle. Seven years later, the Connecticut Supreme Court has ruled that the manufacturer of the Bushmaster can be sued and potentially held liable for the Sandy Hook deaths.

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Less than 10 days ago, in the mosques of Christchurch, New Zealand, 50 immigrant men, women, and children died by the barrel of a semiautomatic rifle wielded by a shooter filled with hate for Muslims and immigrants—good people. Six days after the unspeakable tragedy, New Zealand's Prime Minister announced that such assault rifles will be banned from her country, and a “buy-back” program will be initiated for the benefit of those who own such military-style weapons.

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Molly Pascal is a member of Pittsburg's Tree of Life Synagogue, which was violated last October 27 by a terrorist who murdered 11 Jewish worshippers. In response to the New Zealand attack, Molly wrote a letter of hope that was published last week in the Washington Post. She spoke of actions by the religious community in Pittsburg that visibly demonstrate solidarity across faith lines: Muslims are organized to stand guard at the doors of local synagogues, to ensure the safe passage of Jews to their places of worship. The Temple Sinai synagogue and the Islamic Center of Pittsburg are co-hosting a Shabbat dinner—a Sabbath dinner. Signs bearing messages of love and coexistence dot front yards, construction sites, and shop windows. Molly believes that just as the Muslim community has rallied to support the Jewish community, now is the moment for the Jewish community to rally in support of the

Muslim community. She reminds us that the times in which we live require readiness to participate in the common fight for the right of people of any faith to worship peacefully.

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But...how many more chances do you want?!