

LELC Lent 3

Two weeks ago I talked about my own childhood and memories of King of the Mountain and the Domination System. Last week I talked about memories of my kid's childhood and the lie that sometimes violence is good. Now, if I was really good, I'd have some funny story about, oh maybe, my grandchildren, who are 7 and almost 5 that would tie into today's topic.. *Important things come in 3's*

But there is not much that is funny about today's topic. You all probably figured out all by yourselves that almost always when people use violence to keep order, the order they are keeping is the domination system where some are and stay on top and some are and stay on bottom. That is pretty much universal. Humans everywhere over all time do that.

Today I'm going to talk about the mindgames that people play that help keep the whole domination system running most of the time without having to resort to the physical violence. Unlike domination and violence which are universal, the mindgames we play evolve over time; they are culturally specific. But we see the mindgame that was played in Jesus' day right here in our Gospel text for today.

(Luke 13;1-2, 4-5) At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. Jesus asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" and "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam, fell on them – do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?"

What kind of question is that? Is Jesus implying that people thought those people got killed because they were sinful? Well. Actually, Yes. That attitude is even more clear in the passage from John 9 where some people come and ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" In Jesus' day, people thought that if some misfortune had come to you, it was your own fault. You had sinned somehow. And lest we get even a whiff of antisemitism here, let me point out that in recent decades there have been those who call themselves Christian who have been heard to say the AIDS epidemic was God's punishment. Same misbegotten logic.

Those attitude comes from a twisted logic interpretation of Deut. 30 where the Moses has given the people all the laws and regulations they should live by and

then says, (V. 15-18) “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; ”

By Jesus’ time the way this was being understood was that if you were rich, it must be because God was blessing you because you were not sinning. But if you were poor, or lame, or sick it was because God was not blessing you because you had sinned. How slick is that?!! If you were poor, it wasn’t because of injustice, it was your own fault. If your husband died early and you had no son so you lost all your land, it wasn’t because of corrupt laws, it was because you must have sinned. This mindgame blamed the people on the bottom for their lot; and gave the people on the top an excuse not to care. What a deal!!

Now, I want to cut the people of Jesus’ day a little slack, it’s not like they were the only ones who did that sort of thing. In Eastern religions, especially ones that believe in re-incarnation there is, among some, the attitude that souls choose their next life’s path. So you shouldn’t help a poor person too much because that soul might be wanting to learn the cosmic lesson that can only be learned by being a poor person. Voila!, a mindgame that gives the people who are rich an excuse not to care.

And just to bring it a little closer to home, we have, in our country – and in the Western world in general – come up with our own version of this mindgame. We call it free market capitalism and meritocracy. (while I was growing up it was called the American Dream for short.) This is the idea that, here in good old US of A at least, if you get an education and work hard, show a little hustle along the way, you can be as successful as you want to be, you could make your way up the ladder.

Which means, (twisted logic alert) if you aren’t rich and successful, if you are poor, or homeless, or struggling to get by – it is because you are lazy and don’t try. Your misfortune is your own fault. Voila! An excuse for the folks at the top of the domination mountain not to care about the folks at the bottom.

Oh, and just try telling the black man with a Ph.D and a nice life who gets picked up by the cops and is at the mercy of a trigger-happy cop with a fragile ego and an anger management problem how much difference his hard work and education make in that moment. The mindgame is a lie. It let's some pieces move around a bit, but it doesn't fundamentally change a thing about the Devil's system.

Just to be clear: Jesus rejects the mindgame of his day when he says, "No, I tell you, but unless you repent you will perish just as they did." And I think he would reject the mindgame of our day too. Always there are forces at work, natural and otherwise, that bring misfortune to all of us at some point in our lives. But mostly misfortune is brought on by the injustice of the domination system and the violence we use to perpetuate it. Unless we repent of that systemic evil, unless we turn aside from our participation in it, we will all perish in the end.

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And then, to show them all another way forward, Jesus tells a parable. About a fig tree, its owner, and a kind gardener. (v. 6-9) "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" This is actually a parable about grace and second chances.

We are the fig trees, I think. Not bearing the fruit God hopes for from us. And maybe, given the perniciousness of the domination system, given the prevalence of the use of violence to solve our problems, given the very hard-wiring of our biology with the basic instinct for survival, for ourselves and our offspring, God isn't too surprised. God being both the owner and the gardener. God knows we are planted in the toxic soil of the ways of the world. I think that is what could be meant by the old confession liturgy that said, "We are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." We are trying to bear fruit, but our fears, our need to be self-centered - at least enough to survive, are pretty inescapable and keep us from being what we know God wants us to be.

So now, instead of letting us be cut down or destroyed for poor behavior, the gardener wants to give us extra attention, extra care. The things we need to be fully who we are meant to be. The digging around might be a little uncomfortable or disruptive. There are more than a few folks who tell their faith stories that include

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something of upheaval, misfortune, or uncomfortable twists of fate that brought them to a new place of faith, growth and fruitfulness.

And then the gardener wants to give the tree fertilizer, the nutrients that have been missing. Instead of judgment and condemnation I think God, in Christ Jesus, give us the nutrients we need to bear fruit: love, understanding, encouragement, accountability, and forgiveness - in a word: grace.

Jesus knew the world and its ways. But in this parable Jesus was extending to his followers an invitation, an invitation not to stay stuck in the barrenness of the world as it is, with its corrupt system and evil lie and its insidious mindgame. Jesus was inviting his followers to the repentance of turning around, changing ways, following him into a new and abundant way of life. A life that embraces God's kingdom ways of love and welcome, acceptance and equality, that could bear the fruit of justice, peace and well-being for all.

Part of our Lenten journey is to remember that Jesus extends the same invitation to us, again and again. Jesus invites us forward into a journey of repentance – turning away from the barrenness of the world's ways of domination, violence, and finding excuses not to care. Jesus invites us to a journey of embracing God's way of grace and compassion, and bearing fruit of humble service and love. May we enter more and more deeply into that journey in each of our own lives, and together in this community of faith. Amen.