

**Brothers and Sisters, Grace to you and peace, from God our Father  
and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen...**

Quick story... This past month Kris and I celebrated our 39<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary; and we talked about that day we were married in Seattle. Her father performed the wedding which is always, for us, a bitter sweet memory. You see, less than two years after we were married, her father died of colon cancer. He was an incredible preacher. We still listen to some of his recorded sermons.

A year after her father passed away, Kris' mother was in an accident, and she also passed away. After her husband's death she had started a program called the children's place, just kiddy-corner from the church. It was a safe place for neighborhood kids to go... Both wonderful people, both doing incredible things in the prime of their life, and yet tragically taken from us.

It wasn't too long afterward, we read Rabbi Kushner's Book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, and it was helpful. One of the illustrations he uses in the book is that of a plane that tragically crashes and everyone on board dies. He rhetorically asks, "Should we assume that everyone on the plane was a bad person?" Of course, the answer is emphatically, "no!"

And here is where we encounter our gospel lesson.

Jesus is told about the murder of some Galileans who were in worship and Jesus recounts a story where 18 people died when a tower fell. Both situations are tragic and violent. In both situations, Jesus immediately asks

them a question, “Do you think that because these people died because they were bad people?” In other words, Jesus challenges their judgment that these people who died were bad.

During the time of Jesus, the prevailing theological thought was that you get what you deserve. In other words, all matters of suffering-- misfortune, illness or accident-- were interpreted within a framework of sin. And it makes a simple equation, sinful living results in bad things happening. And of course, the other side of that coin leads to the belief that righteous living results in good things happening.

And of course, this equation is still with us today in different ways... Sometimes we hear it in attitudes or opinions about rich people or poor people. Sometimes there’s an assumption that poor people are poor because of some character deficit.

I remember in college reading an entire book on a sociological phenomenon known as *Blaming the Poor*. I remember reading the book, but nothing else. My point is that this theological equation is still with us.

And of course, this theological idea doesn’t come out of thin air. It’s thoroughly grounded in human experience. And if you want to find scriptures to support this view, the Old Testament is full of them.

And it should be... This theological equation is at the very heart of what it means to follow the law—or the 10 commandments. If you follow the law,

generally speaking, things go well for you. And if you don't, well, generally speaking things might get a little rough.

You see, this theological equation isn't a crazy idea. In fact, it's vitally important. We all need shared guidelines for living together, and those guidelines are themselves, life giving. The law is important!

But too much Law leads to dualistic thinking: where everything is either / or... everything is either good or bad, up or down, left or right, with us or against us...; too much law is merciless, it's punishing, it's judging, it's shaming, it's abusive... Religion that is only focused on the law is deadly...

And please know that some forms of Christianity can be this way! There are Christians who judge other Christians... I grew up in this hypocritical world, in my Sunday school days, there were "real Christians" and "pretend Christians." And of course, only *we* were the real Christians... Do you see how this judgmental hardness cuts people off from one another?

When Law is balanced with Grace there is room for compassion, mercy, forgiveness, creativity, freedom... We always need both—Law and Gospel exactly because we are saints and sinners. This isn't anything new for us. We know this, we've experienced it...

We are a congregation of loving, kind and gracious people. We fully understand that sometimes bad things happen to good people. Now, I wonder if our gospel reading takes us a little deeper.

Another story... Six years ago, Kris spent a month in Saudi Arabia as part of a medical team, she was teaching and coaching labor and delivery techniques to the nurses in Dammam.

I want to ask you, what is your first impression when I mention this? I have to confess I had some misgivings about her going there. Perhaps you remember that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers that flew those planes on Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> were citizens of Saudi Arabia.

I'll be honest; I have a strong tendency to want to judge these people very negatively. To me they seem like harsh, perhaps violent people. And deep within me, I want to judge their whole culture and their religion. And perhaps I just did...

Now, here is where the rubber hits the road. It's really hard for me to believe that these people are also children of God. It's hard for me to imagine that God created and knit these people together. And yet he did... There they are... They are just as much a part of God's good creation as I am.

Original sin is often thought to be disobedience, and it goes much deeper than that. Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Original sin is about being like God, knowing good and evil... Original sin resides in our very judgmental hearts.

And I've said this before; judgment is a tricky thing. We need good judgment as we make choices in our life. This kind of judgment is internal, it is for our well-being and it is life giving.

There is another kind of judgment; this is when we point our fingers at others, when we talk about "their" sinfulness. This is a form of violence; it diminishes... It is breaking the 8<sup>th</sup> commandment and as Luther says in the small catechism, "we are to interpret everything our neighbor does in the best possible light."

In our gospel lesson, I'm not so sure Jesus was chiding these people because they equated suffering with sinfulness, as much as he was chiding them for sitting in judgment of them. Jesus not only corrects their theology, he chides them for their attitudes of being judgmental of these people. Kind of like blaming the victim... And Jesus adds a rather strong note, he says, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Back to the time when Kris was in Saudi Arabia... I wonder if I experienced a little of that perishing-- dying to the hardness of my own heart... when Kris was in Saudi, I was confronted with my very own judgmental finger pointing attitudes.

I remember wondering, "How can I learn to love these people?" It was a spiritual exercise for me. Something I prayed about. And I saw glimpses of a little thaw...

Every day when Kris was there and we talked on that video chat thing, she was filled with stories of the Saudi nurses and how they learned to trust one another. And when I heard these stories of trust, I had to think, this is where the gospel is. This is the bearing of good fruit. This is where Jesus is cultivating that fig tree in our parable... There was something very life giving that happened over there.

As they came to trust one another and collaborated about labor and delivery in Saudi Arabia, there was new birth around birth... At least in my heart... I started to think about these people a little differently... Oh sure, they are different, but they were also people with children and families, people with loving hearts...

So... How is it in your heart with people you've pointed your fingers at? It's really a struggle isn't it? It's a constant journey... A journey of reflection and self-awareness... A journey of repenting... A journey of risk taking and sometimes we are called to go out of our comfort zone... And God is always there... Loving us, so we can love others, and melting our hardened hearts...

It's Lent, time for repentance and renewal. And may God bless us through this journey...

Amen