

Andrew K. Frey

Ash Wednesday

Luke 13:1-9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²

Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

⁸ “ ‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ ” (NIV84)

Theme: Garden of Repentance

You may have heard the story about Olesia Zhukovska—it was on the front page of wels.net and many major news outlets throughout the world. It was a couple weeks ago during all the violence in the Ukraine. Olesia, a medical professional, is a member of our sister congregation in the Ukraine—the Ukrainian Lutheran Church. When all the violence broke out in Kiev she decided to travel there to see if she could help out the wounded and the dying. But then on February 20th things came to a head. Snipers started picking off people in the crowd. Police officers opened up their machine guns on the protestors. Dozens of people were killed—many more wounded. Olesia was wearing a shirt that marked her as a medic. Yet a sniper set his targets on her and shot her in the neck. As she lay on the ground bleeding she tweeted, “I am dying.”

When you read stories like this you may wonder to yourself—why do bad things happen to good people? Why did God allowed this to happen? Why do innocent people die in tragedy after tragedy? Those are questions we can ask, but we don’t have an answer to them—only

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God knows. And he may use such tragedies to strike fear in our hearts—to remind us of our own mortality and what we deserve for our sins, and so lead us to repentance.

In our text for today Jesus talked about two such tragedies. Once a tower fell on 18 men—killing them all. We don’t know exactly how it happened. If it was a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, or an engineering mistake—it doesn’t really matter. Jesus also talked about some Jews who were offering sacrifices to God when Pilate slaughtered them and so mixed their own blood with the of their sacrifices. We don’t know exactly why it happened—was it retribution or punishment for something they did, or a result of persecution—it doesn’t really matter. These are two horrible tragedies. Why did God allow them to happen? Those Jews were offering sacrifices to God and he allowed them to be killed. It would be as if a gunman opened fire on us tonight as we were worshiping. How could God let this happen? There must be a reason, right? Perhaps they were wicked people. Maybe God was punishing them for horrible sin they committed. **I tell you, no!** Jesus said. Those people didn’t die in such a horrible way as a direct result of their sin. Sure, tragedies happen in a general sense because of sin. But not every tragedy is a direct result of sin. So we don’t dare claim that this or that tragedy happened because those people committed this or that sin.

And neither does it mean that those who don’t die are somehow better. It’s not as if those who offered sacrifices without being killed were somehow better than the others. Or that those who weren’t killed by the falling tower were somehow without sin. That would be saying that those whose house were not destroyed by a tornado must have been better than his neighbors whose house was destroyed. No, we’re all sinners. None of us is better than anyone else. We are all deserving of death. Tragedy should strike us all.

And when tragedies strike it reminds us of our own mortality. We are reminded that our own death may be just around the corner. No one is going to escape death. God is going to take us whenever and wherever he chooses. And all of us are sinners who deserve death. When we

die there will be no second chances. We will face judgment when we die.

And we all know the judgment we deserve. So tragedies will also lead us to repentance. That's Jesus' warning to us today. **Repent or you too will perish.** If we don't repent of our sins, we will receive a worse fate than those who died by the tower or at the hands of Pilate. We will die forever in hell.

So we turn away from our sins. What we used to do, is now detestable in our eyes. What we did before is no longer ok in our own minds, but a horrible, disgusting sin. So we don't defend our actions, or try to justify them before God. No, we confess our sins to our God. We are filled with deep-felt sorrow. Guilt weighs down heavy upon us. We feel horrible for what we have done. For we have rebelled against our Lord.

And yet, we know that he forgives us. We won't die eternally as our sins deserve. Because God sent his Son, Jesus. And he suffered for our sins. He was forsaken by his heavenly Father as he took all our sins upon himself. He died for what we have done wrong. The people offering sacrifices or those who were by that tower may not have deserved to die. But how much less did Jesus deserve to die. He never sinned against God—not once. Yet he died, because he took our sins upon himself. The innocent one died so that he could give us his perfect life.

Our sins have been removed and paid for by Christ. We no longer look at God as our judge. He doesn't measure us by how much good we do. Rather he freely forgives us through his son. He grants us his free mercy and grace.

When we see tragedies happen we are reminded of our own sins and mortality. So we go before God with true repentance and know that in Christ we are freely forgiven. And there is another thing we do when disaster strikes—we thank God that we are spared, and make the most out of our new found opportunity.

That's Jesus' point in the parable of the fig tree. It wasn't doing what it was supposed to be doing—producing fruit. So the owner wanted to cut it down. But the gardener wanted to give it more time. He wanted to give it more time to grow and another opportunity to produce fruit.

That's what God does for us. He spares us from tragedies to give us more time to grow in our faith and produce fruits of faith. After all, you are still here. Tragedy may have struck those you know. But it hasn't happened for you. You are still here and still alive. Many people might feel guilty about that. “Why did that person die, and not me? Why did God spare me and not someone else?” The simple and correct answer is that it is his will. He wants to keep you around, so he did. He has more plans for you. He extends your time of grace.

So instead feeling guilty or questioning the Lord's decisions, you make the best out of the opportunity he has given you. He doesn't spare us simply so that we could enjoy life. No he gives you more time to serve and honor him. More times to do his will. He gives us time to obey him, to do what pleases him. He gives us time to show love to others. He gives us more time to repent. He doesn't want anyone to perish. So he extends our time of grace—giving us chance after chance to turn from our sins and follow him. He gives us time to lead others to repentance. To point out their sin in hopes of turning them from the sinful ways and saving them from eternal death. And he gives us more time to spread the gospel. To share with others the message of Jesus Christ. About how he suffered for our sins. How he died in our place. How he has given us the forgiveness of sins—freely by his grace. How we cannot and do not do anything to be saved, for Christ done it all for us already. How through faith in him we receive everything he has won for us. And this faith is worked in us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel.

So it is necessary to get into the means of grace as we face all the many problems this world brings us. The tragedies that this world brings cause us to pause and think about our own death. We are reminded of the wages of our sin. And the damnation they deserve. But if you want to be sure about where you stand, get in the gospel. Read the Word. Be reminded of the love and mercy of God. Of the sacrifice of his Son. Recall your baptisms. That though it the Holy Spirit washed away your sins made you his own dear child. Through our baptisms we have been crucified with Christ and clothed in garment of his righteousness. Receive Christ's true body and blood in, with, and under, the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper. Receive

it on a regular basis—whenever you get the chance. For through it, you have the forgiveness of sins. You receive the very thing Christ gave up and poured out to pay for you sins.

Tragedies seem all too common in our world today. They may cause us to wonder why God allows bad things to happen to good people. They also serve to remind us of who we are and what we deserve. So we go before God in true repentance and know that the only one who was completely innocent died in our place. It is only through his suffering and death that we have the forgiveness of sins. Olesia is still alive—she was rushed to the hospital, and had emergency surgery. God has plans for Olesia. The same stands for you—don't waste your time of grace. But serve the Lord and share his Word. So that others may join us in heaven forever. Amen.