

## Tragedy Blame

L3-19, Mar. 24, 2019  
Lk 13:1-9

The Rev. Dr. Chris Hagen  
Lake Nokomis L. Ch., Mpls

A shooter murders 50 worshippers and bystanders at a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>  
For days images flash across screens and news.  
Interviewers and commentators and analysts and speculators  
pose possible explanations to appease our shock.  
Blame is tried on different players: shooter, guns, open society, immigrants.  
It seems insufficient that such horror and evil and pain  
can be the work of a single, deranged boy.  
Yet when 50 children die in Minnesota due to lack of basic medical care,  
it doesn't quite have the same shock.  
When 50 elderly people in Minnesota die in their own homes for lack of food  
it doesn't quite make the news.  
Last year, 380 people were killed in motor vehicle accidents in Minnesota alone,  
a third of them alcohol being the leading cause,<sup>2</sup>  
and we flip the channel to something else.

A tower in the south district of Jerusalem collapsed, killing 18 bystanders.  
The news flashed across town.  
Speculation ran on who to blame.  
The builders did the same work they always did, nothing to note their culpability.  
Other towers stood nearby.  
Perhaps the victims sinned in some way,  
that death was a consequence of their poor choices.

You know,  
smoke cigarettes and cancer will eat away your lungs,  
skip school, dabble in drugs, and soon you're on the fast track downhill,  
be born in the wrong part of town...  
It's so much easier just to blame the victims,  
that way we can relieve ourselves of the burden of caring,  
we can move past empathy,  
and shove the hard work of changing circumstances back on the sufferer.

Or the poor Galileans,  
they were not much to begin with,  
in that neighborhood of high crime, run-down houses and broken families.  
The New Zealand coward with guns can't hold a candle  
to the cruelty and depravity of Pontius Pilate.  
The poor always get picked on.  
Out sheer brutality, Pilate had his soldiers slaughter poor residents as they worshipped,  
their own blood violating and corrupting what was holy, good and life-giving.  
But such evil is easier set aside as  
"well, that's just the neighborhood,"  
"that's just North Minneapolis,"  
"no surprise given who lives there."

It is hard to accept that accidents just happen,  
it is *not* "God's will,"

---

<sup>1</sup> Christchurch mosque shootings, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christchurch\\_mosque\\_shootings](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christchurch_mosque_shootings) , accessed 3/22/2019.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Harlow, *Traffic fatalities increased in Minnesota in 2018* , <http://www.startribune.com/traffic-fatalities-increased-in-minnesota-in-2018/503812012/> , accessed 3/22/2019.

it is *not* tit-for-tat judgment on poor choices,  
 it did *not* “happen for a reason.”  
 It’s distressing to think that accidents just happen,  
 that we all are vulnerable and that there are threats that could come to us anytime.

Jesus offers some seemingly heartless words,  
 “No, I tell you,  
     but unless you repent, you all will perish as they did,”  
     senselessly crushed by accident or brutally victimized for no reason.

I think Jesus was trying to tell us  
 that trying to make sense out of senseless situations is a waste of time.

I think Jesus was trying to tell us  
 to make each day count,  
 to live your own life in a way that is rich in compassion and care,  
 to check your own attitudes and assumptions for how they align with holy.

I think Jesus was trying to tell us  
 we don’t have forever, this is the life we are given,  
 so live it to the fullest with love and grace.

Jesus then tells a parable about a man planting a fig tree.  
 An owner planted a tree and expected fruit.  
     The *reason* he planted the tree is to get fruit.  
     *It is only fair* that since he put money out to get the tree,  
     put time and labor in to plant and water the tree,  
     that he get some fruit back from the tree.

We expect life *to be fair*.  
 We expect our dealings with one another *to be fair*.  
 We expect that if we work hard we get paid a living wage.  
 We expect that our paycheck reflects our worth as an employee.  
 We expect that if we take care of our health,  
     eat properly, exercise regularly, drive responsibly  
     that we will stay healthy and live long.  
 It’s only fair.

The man planted a tree and expected fruit.  
 So, how do we interpret this parable.  
     One way is to say the man who planted is God  
     and the vinedresser who intercedes is Jesus, placating a vengeful God.  
 However, this interpretation does not seem to fit the rest of the Bible.  
 God as vengeful planter, demanding results, ripping out those not up to standards,  
     *does not fit* the God of the Bible.

God in the Bible is described as a father scanning the horizon  
 and then running with foolish abandon  
     to hug and kiss a wayward, ungrateful son.

God in the Bible is described as  
 a widow scouring the floor for one small coin going missing,  
     *that not even* the smallest, least-noticed person is lost to God.

God in the Bible is described as  
 a shepherd who would leave a huge flock of sheep  
     to search hills and brambles for one small lost sheep,  
     *that there is more rejoicing in heaven* for a wayward sinner repenting  
     than 99 faithful church-goers.

God in the Bible is described as  
 a man sowing wheat but an enemy comes and spoils the field with weed seeds,  
 and the man instead of uprooting everything and starting over,  
     *will put up with weeds* so as to save the wheat.

So I think a more accurate way to read the parable  
of the man planting a tree that does not bear fruit,  
is to make the man *us who expect only what is fair*,  
*us* who are quick to pass judgment and meet out punishment.

The owner of the fig tree is *any of us* who wants the world in balance  
and considers hardship and disasters  
as deserved outcome for some foolish or poor choices,  
and who hold that well-being and comfort  
is deserved reward for being good boys and girls.

The one who planted and judged and now wants to cut down—*is us*.

Then the vinedresser, *the laborer caring* for the tree at the direction of the owner  
is Jesus, who advises *us*  
to be patient,  
to not judge so quickly,  
to give help, direction, resources, nurture,  
to give a second chance,  
to coax and guide, support and sooth  
so that maybe, given a chance,  
the tree will come around,  
so that maybe, given a chance,  
the person will change.

Jesus the vinedresser advises us  
that instead of judging and imposing consequences,  
a better approach is to acknowledge people where they are,  
care for them in ways that will get them past the hardships they face,  
and allow the possibility of change and new chances.

Disasters come *without* our deserving.  
Terrible diseases and accidents and failures  
fall upon people *who do not deserve* such troubles.  
Jesus has some words to say about terrible things that happen.  
*Repent*, is his warning.

Repent!  
Repentance is more than feeling sorry for some vague sin and promising to try to change.  
Repentance that Jesus warns is not even about anything personal or individual decision.  
In the sense that Jesus gives,  
*repentance is about changing lives*,  
about “working toward healing those broken by life circumstances.”  
Repentance is about personally seeing to it that another person as a chance at a better life.

Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church has limited time.

Jesus gave the tree one more year.  
We need to make each day count.  
We don't have forever.

This is the *optimal* time to take stock,  
assess our options,  
listen to what future God is holding out to us,  
let go of ways that hinder,  
curiously explore ideas,  
consider alternatives.

Our financial situation is dependent on a school supplying rent to stay afloat.

This church is one contract away from going under.  
Hennepin Middle School is truly a blessing to us and this neighborhood.  
But we should not be dependent on their rent to pay our bills.

Three churches are exploring how we might more closely partner in ministry,  
three congregations  
of different denominations,  
different skills, different talents,  
different ministry purposes,  
but all whose members are neighbors in this community,  
all who desire to please God,  
all who faithfully follow Jesus,  
all who passionately want to be blessing.

The question we should be asking is *not* “what’s in it for us.”

The key question that is at the heart of our future is “what’s in it for God?”

What is God demanding of us with this opportunity?

Repentance means thinking and then behaving in a different way.

Repentance that Jesus warns

is about re-adjusting our church and our ways

as God’s Holy Spirit brings about different circumstances and opportunities.

Repentance that Jesus commands

is about being attuned to what God’s Spirit is doing among us.

The good news is that we have time.

This is the opportune time.

The gardener Jesus has bought us some time.

Amen.