

Our gospel for today takes place while Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem and he is teaching his disciples and the crowds as he goes. It begins with the report of two events of suffering and tragedy.

In the first, Jesus is told that Pilate had had some Galileans killed during their offering of sacrifice in Jerusalem. Imagine the outrage in the voices of those who are telling this to Jesus. These people had been killed while they worshipped. Pilate had some of his best soldiers in the crowd of worshippers and then systematically killed people from the center of the crowd outwards.

The other tragedy was an accident, a tower in Siloam had collapsed and killed 18 people.

These two events raised the same kinds of questions we ask when innocent people suffer today and when innocent people die today. Why did they have to suffer? Why did they have to die? What did they do to deserve this?

In Jesus' day, people saw these catastrophes as some kind of punishment from God. Jesus rejected that common belief they held that disease, poverty, and tragedy were punishment for people's sin.

Now, it is possible that the tower at Siloam fell because of the sin of fraudulent contractors, but those people were not killed to punish them for their sin.

It isn't difficult to find examples of tragedy or suffering in our world today. Right now, we continue to see images of the effects of war in Ukraine.

Just like the people in Jesus' day, we sometimes have a tendency to blame the victims of tragedies. That tendency often is most clear when we face disasters. We ask what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We look for some cause to explain the effect we are facing.

But Jesus dismisses this link between misfortune and sin. He makes the point that he makes many other times. Don't presume that when bad things happen that they happened because the people were bad; and don't presume when hardship misses you that it means that you are good. Life has a way of being life. Rain falls on the just and the unjust.

Jesus goes on to say, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." He reminds them that tragedy can strike at any time. The words that we heard on Ash Wednesday come to mind as another way of saying what Jesus is saying here: "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return."

It is a good reminder for us to use the time we have been given by God. To not waste the gift of now. It is a good reminder for us to examine our lives and make the adjustments that are needed to put God first, to love God completely, to grow evermore Christlike, and to reach out in love to those around us.

Jesus' words are a reminder to look at how we live and what we do. They are a reminder of the responsibility we have as people who have been so greatly blessed.

Jesus goes on to tell a parable. It is a parable about patience and forgiveness. It is a parable about second chances. It is a parable about God's never-ending love for us.

I am always intrigued by the each of the characters in Jesus' parables and who they represent. In this parable there is the owner and a gardener. At first, it seems as if it might make sense to see God in the owner. But if you read the parable closer, you see something quite different. The owner is impatient and demanding. The owner wants results right now and is concerned with the efficiency of the operation. That doesn't sound much like God.

I see God much more in the gardener. The one who cares and nurtures. The one who asks for leniency, compassion, and patience. The one who is willing to give the tree another chance to show its worth and value. God is much more like the gardener.

You and I are actually more like the owner. We are much more willing to write people off. It is we who are ready with sharpened ax in hand to swing at the base of any trunk that we do not find to our liking and bring it crashing down to the ground.

God is not like that. God is the one who gives another chance....and another...and another....and another....until we get as many chances as we need to bear that good fruit that God brings about in our lives.

The owner tells the gardener to cut down the tree. He says, "Why should this tree go on using up good soil and nutrients? It is a waste of resources. Let's get rid of it and plant another tree that will bear fruit."

It is the gardener that says, "Don't cut it down. Not yet. Give it just one more year. I will water it, dig around it, and fertilize it. Then we will see if it will bear fruit. Give just one more chance."

One of the lessons in this parable is about God's ever-abundant mercy. God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. In our first reading for today, Isaiah assures us that God will abundantly pardon. We are reminded that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and that God's ways are not our ways. God is God...and God forgives whomever it pleases God to forgive.

In the parable, more time is given to the fig tree to produce. But the fig tree doesn't do it on its own. The gardener will take steps so that the tree will be fruitful. The parable isn't a shape-up or else story. If we are to change the direction of our lives this Lent or anytime, or take a stronger, more committed orientation toward God, we need help.

It's typical for us to think we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We think we can grit our teeth and help ourselves. But the work is first done by the gardener. Results are expected, but we need help first. This parable reminds us that God is gracious and is on our side to bring about change.

During this season of Lent, we are reminded how much God loves us and forgives us. We remember that through our baptism we have been marked and sealed as Christ's own...as God's own child forever.

There's a story about a commencement address given by the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill. After enduring a lengthy introduction, it's said that Churchill got up from his seat, walked to the podium, and stared at his audience of new graduates. He simply said, "Never give up." He then turned, walked back to his seat, and sat down. As the stunned students sat in silence, Churchill, with perfect timing, once again got up from his chair, returned to the podium, and again announced, "Never give up" and returned to his seat again. Churchill returned to the podium again and again – five times in all – each time delivering his single minded message, "Never give up." With that he was finished and did not return to the podium. Every graduate in that audience never forgot that speech and never forgot that he or she was to "never give up."

My friends, God's love for us is never ending. God never, never, never, never, never gives us up on us.

Amen.