

**“Compassion: Visiting the Ruins”**  
**Rev. Michelle Madsen-Bibeau**  
**Third Sunday in Lent**  
**March 24, 2019**  
**Higganum Congregational Church**  
**First Congregational Church of Haddam**

**Luke 13:1-9**

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or 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? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”*

*6Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So 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?’ 8He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”*

As most of you know, for Lent this year I have organized a series of messages around the lectionary Gospel readings and the theme of Compassion.

- The first in this series reminded us of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, the 40 days of which are remembered in the 40 days of Lent, and which represent God’s Compassion for us in sharing the human experience of temptation.
- Last week I spoke with you a bit about Compassion for the people of our cities, especially in light of how easy it has been for me at least to remain isolated from those needs in the relative peace of country and suburbs where I’ve lived.
- Reflecting on our capacity for Compassion is important given the “Compassion fatigue” that can set in when we drink from the firehose of news and information now available literally 24/7. From New Zealand to Zimbabwe to Nebraska, being willing to notice can feel overwhelming.
- But the question of “for whom shall I have compassion?” was always difficult, just on the face-to-face human scale. This week I had to think about how much compassion I should have for a kid who wasn’t that nice to my kid. Sure that individual is a work in process and a child of God, but is Mama Bear prepared to care? I dunno.
- So I hope this sermon series, as it touches on one and another aspect of our call to follow Jesus in Compassion, leads you as it has been me to watch for those decision points when we can choose Compassion or not, and encourages us to risk love.

During the recent Cottage Meetings I heard about a sermon Rev. Ann Crites of the Haddam Church preached called “Why do good things happen to bad people?” That’s such a great theme! While I’m not tackling that exact topic, our scripture text today shows Jesus dealing with a related question, perhaps one we have asked or to which we have assumed we know the answer: “Why do bad things happen?”

Now I admit Jesus’ answer: “repent or you’ll perish too” may not at first seem all that comforting, in fact it may not seem like it belongs in a sermon series on Compassion at all. Stay with me, though.

The people who came to Jesus were trying to prove- to themselves mostly I suspect- that a terrible fate that had befallen some at the hands of Pilate could never happen to them. Surely there must have been something about those Galileans that meant they deserved what they got. The question was framed as a newsy inquiry: “Hey, did you hear about that? What do you think of it, Jesus?”

For any of you who might admit to familiarity with the musical *Be More Chill*, the song “The Smartphone Hour” and the phrase “*R-I-C-H, can’t you see? Just how much I care about your tragedy?*” rather captures the way I think these ones who came to Jesus expected things to go. It’s basically: “Yes, yes, terrible thing, let’s chew it over in all its gruesome details, real and imagined, because your catastrophe is my entertainment.” Then as now, this approach is a common coping, and distancing, method.

Now history doesn’t describe the particular incident mentioned in Luke, but Pilate was well-known for state terrorism, responding to any hint of organized resistance from the people with brutality, as when Josephus records he sent disguised soldiers into a crowd with daggers to kill thousands in Jerusalem one Passover. It was difficult to know what might have set Pilate “off,” but Galileans apparently did have something of a reputation for rebellion.

I taught a first-year course at Quinnipiac in which our topic was civil disobedience, when protestors intentionally break laws they believe are unjust. Not surprisingly for a group of mostly 18-year-olds, the vast majority of my students strongly associated being good with not breaking laws. This took several forms, the most amusing being their ability to justify criminal behavior in which they chose to participate, mainly around alcohol consumption, while maintaining an otherwise strict ethical stand against crime. They were good, deserving people, in spite of any misdeeds, but others who broke laws were probably bad people. You know, like these Galileans simply “must” have been.

My students expressed assumptions I believe are a starting place for many of us: beliefs about good being rewarded and bad punished, comforting schemas to organize the world, if you are, as they and I, mainly beneficiaries of the status quo.

Then we’d start reading about social science research into human behavior. We’d learn about individuals who gave every appearance of being good citizens doing terrible things when put into situations where social norms allowed or pushed them to do so, and my students would struggle to imagine this could apply to anyone they knew. Just like the researchers assumed when they designed most of these studies, my students figured only a tiny fraction of people would

succumb to evil suggestion, not such a large percentage that it necessarily had to include “normal” folks.

Occasionally I’d have an outlier in class who really “got” what social psychology suggests about people, that we are not as independent as we feel, but depend on one another to fashion and point our moral compass, and that we all are prone to moral failure given the right, or I guess I should say the “wrong,” circumstances.

And you know, it was those few outliers who gave me hope, not only because I knew they would be watching themselves and others carefully to guard against lapses, but also because they tended to be the students who demonstrated the most Compassion, whether for dorm mates struggling with alcohol abuse, or for people halfway round the world living with the aftermath of war or genocide.

This past Wednesday when I visited the day house for Family Promise of Central Connecticut with a group of clergy, one of the former program participants who is now in stable housing was there talking about how she had ended up homeless. It wasn’t bad decisions, she said, it’s not always bad decisions. She always worked. She had two children, spaced six years apart. But when her younger was 6, by which time she was a single mom, she had health issues. And suddenly there she was with her kids, seeking shelter. Family Promise became her family, giving her a safe situation for her kids so they were not deprived, which as she said, was and is the thing that matters most to her. And because it was done in a spirit of dignity and respect, she never lost her expectation of herself as the provider for her kids; she just grew in a sense of connection and didn’t feel alone.

Contrast that response to human need with what happened in the early days of HIV and AIDS. In his book *The Band Played On*, Randy Shilts tracked the history of the first half of the 80’s. The disease was considered a just punishment for sins of the flesh, allowing “nice people,” including most of us who called ourselves Christians in those years, to ignore AIDS in public policy while thousands of precious children of God died. Like those who spoke of the Galileans to Jesus, we either believed or wanted to believe that something so devastating could remain someone else’s problem. After way too long, so-called polite society realized there is no such thing as just someone else’s problem, that babies and medical professionals and our own precious sons and daughters were just as susceptible to the disease as Haitians and gay club hoppers and IV drug users, those we had for practical purposes previously agreed “deserved” their suffering. You know, like those Galileans under Pilate.

What is Jesus’ response to those who blame and relegate? He turns the lens back on them. You are worried about their sins?! Repent of your own! Repent of distancing yourselves from others, from putting people into those boxes of good and bad.

Jesus is so forceful in his words, I think, because it’s very hard to notice when we are doing this. Right up to the moment we see it as something else, as an opportunity for Compassion, it feels like common sense, justice, cause and effect, what did they expect?

Because I was thinking along these lines I caught myself in one while listening to the news the other day. BREXIT. Vote for isolation, vote without a plan, vote in favor of your national

interest against others, don't act surprised when things don't all come together, and now those other countries mysteriously don't want to help.

But my Lord. Would I be willing to see a return to the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland if BREXIT border issues reignite smoldering coals? Am I a person who could say in that situation, "you got what you asked for"? I hope to the God of St. Patrick and the Archbishop of Canterbury, no.

Just to be sure we "get it," Jesus gives a second example, of the tower of Siloam in southern Jerusalem which collapsed and killed 18. Unlike Pilate's political attack, this situation would be under the insurance heading of "Act of God." But whether "smote" by natural cause like an earthquake or through human failures of building methods, Jesus says God's not doing the "smiting," and the victims are not to be thought culpable.

That may seem old fashioned, maybe, ("we don't do that!"), but we still blame victims- every time we ask the person diagnosed with lung cancer how long they smoked, or side-eye the kind of car or phone people bring to the soup kitchen.

Or, a story I recall from several years ago and can reference because no one was hurt, about a new fire chief whose house burned down when they put out literal smoldering coals in a box in their garage, thinking they were dead ashes. I admit to rolling my eyes.

What Jesus might prefer is that I bless God that all my mistakes thus far have not resulted in a tragedy. It's good fortune, not my goodness or God watching out for me but not that fire chief, that has kept my house standing.

Yes, we ought to be careful, and do maintenance, and make good choices, but it is *hubris* to think we can prevent every calamity. There is a bumper sticker that I'll paraphrase for church that I am absolutely convinced Jesus would have had on his wagon if he'd ever owned one, "Stuff happens." And some of the "stuff" that happens is pretty, "stuffy." If our lives, our "stuff," doesn't stink, we should be grateful, for we are lucky!

The most important lesson Jesus may have taught that day, though, is for the unlucky. Imagine when Jesus spoke, a Galilean widow or an orphan from Siloam hearing his words: the burden his reassurances lifted from the survivors. "*My husband, my father, who died- they were the good men I loved. Hey, who is this rabbi, who does not condemn people for their own suffering?*"

The story of the fig tree that Jesus next tells is a hopeful one for those willing to be humble. The tree that insists it's fine as it is, that it's ok to continue to produce nothing of sweet kindness, nothing of refreshing grace, that tree will be cut down before long.

But the one that receives the ministrations of the patient gardener, the one that takes into itself the rich amendment of the "stuff" of the world, will become healthy enough to bless others.

As we travel these next weeks of our Lenten pilgrimage, may we allow God to dig around our roots and deepen in us compassion for those who suffer, that we may grow in gratitude and humility. Amen.