

FALLING TOWERS AND FIG TREES  
LUKE 13: 1-9

March 7, 2010 – Third Sunday in Lent  
University Church  
Eugene H. Winkler, Pastor

It was a small Methodist church, very Southern—so Southern that its trustees refused to change the etched stained-glass above the main entrance that read “M.E. Church, South,” although the union of the northern and southern branches had been accomplished two decades earlier—and very proud of its “boy pastors” who had started there as students and then gone on to fame and glory. I was one of those wide-eyed, idealistic young men who thought I knew more than the farmers and small-town merchants, secretaries and cooks who constituted my congregation.

I am reminded of Mark Twain’s remark about his Daddy in Hannibal, Missouri: “When I left home, I thought he was the dumbest man in the world. When I came back twenty years later, after the War and the gold rush and traveling a good deal, I was surprised at how much the old man had learned in two decades”. That’s me as I reflect on my relationships with the Fletchers, the Varnums, the Wilsons, the Johnsons and dozens of others in that tiny town forty years ago. They knew more than I will ever know, they were both wise and patient with me. I don’t know if they ever took much pride in me after I left there, at least as much as they did in some of my predecessors.

Except one. One of their young preachers had gone on to some prestigious pastorates, was on his way to the top—which meant a First Church in a county-seat town or an appointment as a district superintendent. He had attained to a church of some renown, had a wife and three teenage children, was noted for his preaching and pastoral abilities. But one day, he cracked. The stress, the pressure, the in-fighting among his members, the strain that every clergy person faces of having to hide one’s humanity lest the symbolism, the image be negated became too much for Dewey.

So, on a Sunday morning that seemed to have a script written by William Faulkner or Eudora Welty, Dewey mounted the pulpit of his church. He began his sermon in the usual fashion, with a catchy little story that he then linked with a Scripture lesson he had selected to undergird his theme. He preached in the style of that time: three points and a poem. Everything went well until he got to the second point, and then he cracked. He began to perspire, he moved out of the pulpit and began to pace the area in front of the altar rail, then he began to move up and down the aisles of the Akron-style, almost in-the-round Methodist church.

His anger, frustration, all of his depression, his long-suppressed humanity spilled over. He began to weep, to plead, to ask questions of his fearful, dismayed congregation. “How did we get to this point? What does all this mean? How can we escape the wiles of the world? Why does all this happen to me? What does it mean? Why can’t our lives, my life, be simple again?”

Presently, the ushers and the chairman of the official board mustered enough presence of mind, enough courage, to escort their pastor to his study. He had disintegrated before their very eyes, had changed from a tall, authoritative figure in a gray morning coat and striped trousers into a pitiful, broken human being much like the people they feared they, too, could so easily become.

After Dewey had spent some months in a state mental hospital but was still unappointable as a Methodist pastor, I invited him to return to the tiny town and loving church where he had begun his ministry. I shall never forget that Sunday morning when he seemed to tower above the pulpit, seemed too large and formidable for that tiny sanctuary—until it happened again as he began to try to preach his first sermon in months. This time he didn't weep or break into a sweat, but he began to ask those disturbing questions that nobody understood or wanted to try to answer.

When I think of Dewey, I think of Pontius Pilate, a man of many contradictions and paradoxes, an important government official who makes one mistake after another while serving as the Roman governor of Palestine/Israel. In today's Gospel lection, some people tell Jesus about Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate while on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Their "blood," Luke writes, "Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. The discussion prompts Jesus to ask a question of his questioners: "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Then he reminds them of eighteen other Jews who were killed when "the tower of Siloam fell on them." "Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others" who were spared?

Everyone of us knows both Dewey's frustration and the questions raised by the Galileans, don't we? How many times have you asked, "Why did this have to happen?" Why did things turn out this way? What's going to happen to me? You wake up in the middle of the night, half-aroused by a dream, a deep, abiding anxiety, a fear, and all the possibilities for defeat and disaster parade before you at the foot of your bed. All your regrets and failures march through your half-conscious prayers. We can relate both to Pilate and to that erstwhile Methodist clergyman.

"Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong," says Barbara Brown Taylor. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the problem, some way that we can change what we are doing and thus stop whatever has gone (or is going) wrong. "What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than consequences," Taylor writes. "What we crave above all is control over the chaos of our lives."

It was no different in the first century than it is now. People longed then just as deeply as we do now to understand and control misfortune. Jesus is hanging out with his fellow Galileans—a bunch of country folk who are considered the hillbillies of first-century Palestine—and they are angry. They tell him "about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1).

And they have every right to be angry! It was bad enough to live in a country occupied by Pilate and his Roman minions, but here was an occasion—have you heard about this, Jesus?—when he sent soldiers into the sacred precincts of the Temple and had men—our countrymen!—cut down like lambs to the slaughter. More than that: they were not only cut down like lambs but alongside the sacrificial, slaughtered lambs, so that the blood of patriots and holy sacrifices were mingled.

We frequently encounter the unanswerable question. The classic, of course, is the old stand-by: “Do you still beat your wife?” If you answer yes, that means you are beating your wife; if you answer no, that means you used to beat her, but now you’ve stopped. Either way, you’re hung.

I used to preach once or twice a year in the City Church in New York City. I was invited during the summer when most of the congregation spent the weekends on Long Island. And each time I went there I encountered a mentor in the faith, a great preacher who greeted me with an unanswerable question: “Are you still preaching my sermons?” If I answer yes, that means I’m guilty of plagiarism, but if I answer no, it means I used to plagiarize Ernie’s sermons but no longer do so. My friend Maurice Boyd came up with the classic answer to the question: “I have searched your sermons high and low for something in them that is preachable.”

Jesus is not aiming to comfort the crowd. He wants to challenge them. He touches the panic we all feel when we do not understand what is happening and why it is happening and what we might be able to do to change the situation. Our Lord is both sympathetic to their fear and vulnerability but also concerned that they need to look at their own lives.

Like us, those Galileans labor under the impression that real faith means assenting to ‘truths’—such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, heaven and hell, the divinity of Jesus. Nearly everyone has some intellectual difficulty with at least part of those doctrines. But if faith is understood as a process of trust which develops in the context of an ongoing relationship with God, doubt makes a great deal of sense as an authentic aspect of the life of faith.

That wonderful Southern writer, Roy Blount, Jr., has asked a penetrating question about such querulous questions and our arrogance in trying to bow God to our will, “Has any religious group ever expressed concern that they were boring God?”

Questions must have answers, so consider the nature of the answer. There are no explanations for such tragedies, Jesus declares, but they still point us to the reality that we live in a world in which we are not in control, and constitute a call to repentance. Jesus’ hearers are urged to avoid constructing an explanation for the evils of life and to see such calamities as reminders of life’s fragility. Anyone, relatively good or evil, could find himself or herself standing before the final Judge without any advance warning. Repentance means turning your life around. It is the crucial decision of life, and it means bearing good fruit.

So Jesus tells them a parable about a tree that exists to bear fruit. God is interested in lives that produce deeds of justice and compassion. If the tree remains fruitless, it is taking up precious ground and must be cut down. The ax is already at the foot of the tree, yet there is a reprieve for one more year.

This is a call to discern the time in which we live, when we are confronted by the reality of God's reign. It is not a summons for a general feeling of remorse about our bad lives but a call to discern the time in which we live, when we are confronted by God's Reign. We are called to a radical orientation of how we think and live—not by Lenten resolves to do better but by confronting the Word and reality of God's Reign as present in Jesus. We are called to re-orient our lives to God's truth.

That's important for us to remember, because the church is rooted in community and tradition. We stand in a heritage larger than our personal horizons. We are indebted to our mothers and fathers in the faith. We are stamped as Christians through the faith community called the Church. We are not just a group of people who happen to worship together on Sunday morning or think alike and agree on most subjects. Questions arise to answer our questions, but always within the context of the church.

When we do not take ourselves so seriously, when our self-importance is occasionally punctured—even shattered—we realize that all does not depend on us. We are, to use Wayne Oates's wonderful phrase, "stewards of our wounds." Our wounds do not make us less lovable; on the contrary, they draw forth God's compassion.

Life presents us more than we care to admit with this kind of answer. If we confront it—or if we dare to be confronted by the answer we don't want to hear—it drives us to humility. That means that we do not debase ourselves, but look honestly at our own capabilities and gifts. And learning that we don't have to be better than a sister or a brother. Roberta Bondi has said, "Humility accepts our human vulnerability and the fact that we sin. It is not so overwhelmed by human weakness that it is left paralyzed, thinking over its own inadequacy."

Even Jesus had to face that moment of relinquishment. In what could be characterized as the most decisive moment of his life on that terrible last night in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done," he realized that he had to hear his Father's answer and that meant torture, humiliation and, ultimately, death.

It is highly unlikely that you and I will be asked to die for our faith. That's not the issue for us. As Thackeray said, "'Tis not the dying for a faith that's so hard...every person of every nation has done that—'tis the living up to it that's difficult."

One of my favorite poets, Edna St. Vincent Millay, put it best:

*Not truth, but Faith, it is  
That keeps the world alive.*