

Have you ever noticed that when people draw lines about what is right and what is wrong that we always draw the lines so that we are on the side that is right? It's like when two siblings share a bedroom and then they have a fight and then one of them gets a role of tape and puts a line down the room about who can live on which side of the room.

We do that same thing when we decide about what is right and what is wrong. We in South Carolina are in the middle of our presidential primaries. I bet when you decide or decided whom to vote for you came up with a list of criteria and your candidate came out on the right side of your criteria.

I bet when you decide where to get your news from whether it is NPR or Fox News or Huffington Post or The Wall Street Journal that you have a list of criteria of what is important and your preferred news source always comes out on the right side of your list.

I bet when you decide about hot button issues like abortion or death penalty or immigration or who should be able to get married you have a line drawn about what is right and what is wrong and your position always falls on the side that is right. We all do it. We all decide what is right and what is wrong and our position always falls on the side of the line that is right.

The Scripture that we just read from Luke 13 addresses this topic. Jesus is with a group of people and they tell Jesus about an event where there were some Galileans that were in the Temple and Pontius Pilate had them killed in the Temple. This story that they tell Jesus about Pilate killing people in the Temple we don't hear about from anywhere in the Bible except here in this retelling in Luke.

So the people asking the question want to know, "what did the people do in order to suffer this punishment?" They must have done something wrong. The people are asking with a self-righteousness that they are living right and the people killed must be doing something wrong so that is why something bad happened to them.

Jesus responds to their point by bringing up another event that we don't hear about elsewhere in Scripture. Jesus says, "well, what about those 18 people that were killed due to shoddy construction of the wall around Jerusalem? Did they die because of something they did? Jesus answers his rhetorical question with an emphatic, "no." Bad things do happen to good people.

Jesus shares a theological understanding of God similar to what we find in the Old Testament book of Job. In both Job and then here with Jesus, we are told that bad things do happen to good people. Just because something bad happens to someone does not mean that it was caused by something they had done. Just because good things are happening to someone does not mean that they are doing something right.

Jesus then tells his hearers that they need to repent. We may think we know what that word means. But the word "repent" simply means that they must change the way they view the events of their lives. Jesus says don't connect cause and effect to events in our lives. Jesus invites them to view their lives with a different perspective. To repent and live in the world differently.

Jesus then shares a parable. The parable of the barren fig tree. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came looking for fruit on it. For three years the tree bore no fruit. The man tells the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener says give it one more year. The gardener says that he wants to tend to it and spread some manure on it. I grew up on a dairy farm. I know all about what good manure can do. Spread some manure all around it and let's give it one more chance to produce.

So in this parable, the people are invited to repent and change their way of thinking. They had been drawing lines and deciding who was the most sinful and it wasn't them. Those people are sinful and we are not. But Jesus says that is a wrong way of viewing God.

The people shouldn't be drawing these lines and deciding who is right and who is wrong. They should, instead, be examining their own lives and asking themselves what they could be doing to be more faithful to God.

Recently in my Mom's church near Columbia a member of their church Session shared a story from her life which I think illustrates what it means to be challenged to view a situation from a different perspective. To repent. This woman who shares this event in her life is named Debby and she recently said this during their morning worship service:

As a person living in Columbia in 2016, I can't imagine leaving my home and family to follow Jesus, or selling everything I own and giving the money to the poor, so what does it mean to be a disciple now? Perhaps some of you have struggled with this question as well. How can I be the servant Jesus calls me to be? This question really hit home for me recently.

Debby continued by sharing with her church about a recent event in her life:

After seventeen plus years of working at a library in downtown Columbia, I have interacted with many homeless people and others down on their luck. I have always felt uncomfortable when approached for money by these people. Almost all of our "regulars" had substance abuse issues, so would I really be helping them by giving them money? If I gave to one, wouldn't I become an easy target for all the others? Where should I draw the line?

I always felt that they were better served if I gave money to one of the many agencies tasked with helping them get back on their feet, instead of handing over cash. These all seemed like good reasons not to get personally involved and yet feel satisfied that I had helped.

Debby then shared her new found revelation after looking at her situation differently.

But now, over the past two weeks, I have been approached by four separate women asking for money for food – please just a dollar or two. Last Saturday night, as I was getting out of the car to attend the symphony, a lady approached and requested "just a quarter or two" to buy some food. She said she had diabetes.

I said I was sorry I couldn't help her, and then sat through the symphony and agonized over my refusal to help someone who was so obviously in great need. I kept hearing Jesus' words from Matthew in my mind: "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. If you did not do it for the least of these, you did not do it for me."

Since then I have been thinking more and more about my own discipleship. Perhaps those needy women were sent to wake me up, to call me to be more personally involved in something I have always stepped away from.

Debby then asks herself these questions:

Does that make me feel uncomfortable? Indeed it does! But as I rethink my priorities, I realize that Jesus doesn't call me to be comfortable – right now I feel He is calling me to be a better servant to those in need. Think about it ... what does being a disciple mean to you? These are the words and questions from Debby, a Disciple of Jesus Christ in her church in Irmo, SC.

In the parable that Jesus tells, the gardener begs the owner to give the tree one more year to bear fruit. The gardener then sets out to do everything that he can to help that tree to begin to produce. The same is true for us.

Even if we feel as though we have not been productive in some way, we are given another chance to produce. But we are not left alone. We are given good manure to make changes in our lives. We are given the gifts and the insights to see our lives from a different perspective. To see the world and our lives closer to the way that God sees our lives.

The first text from Peter reminds us that a thousand years are like a day in God's view. Maybe God is giving us some clues in our lives to look at our life differently. Maybe God is showing us a different way to live our lives. Maybe God is providing us another chance to make some changes that will lead us to be closer to what God seeks for us to be.

If this parable is correct, then maybe we are having some nasty smelling manure spread all around us to help us grow and become.

So what is it that you sense God is inviting you to see about your life and faith that you may be choosing to ignore? AMEN.

-Text: 2 Peter 3:8-10; Luke 13:1-9

-Given: February 21, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

-Tidsworth, Mark, Pinnacle Associates, <http://pinnaclelead.com/church/blog.html>