

“- do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?” Luke 13:4  
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We don't know what Jesus was referring to in the two stories he mentions in today's text. The background to his remarks is lost, but we can guess at what happened. We know that Pontius Pilate was a cruel man and that he had Jesus killed even though he thought Jesus was innocent. We know that Pilate killed people indiscriminately from the records we possess. But this is the only place in which we encounter the chilling message that he practiced something akin to human sacrifice, if that's what it was. In any case, whatever he did sounds pretty bad. Then there was the tower of Siloam that fell down and killed some people in Jerusalem. Was it part of the city wall? Was it a watchtower that fell? Whatever it was it had to have been pretty big to kill eighteen people when it fell down.

When Jesus was informed about those unfortunate Galileans whose blood had been mingled with Pilate's sacrifices, he immediately launched into a theological debate that has raged ever since. It's the debate about connections. Is there a connection between our sins and our earthly fate? Is there a connection between the evil that we do and how we die? The old saying goes that if we live by the sword we will die by the sword, and that is quite true. If we habitually engage in dangerous activity, chances are we will not survive our habit. But Jesus is not talking about that. He is not talking about dying from dangerous activities. He is talking about what happens to people sometimes that doesn't seem to make sense. He is addressing the question of guilt and chance, not cause and effect. He is talking about why some people suffer terribly, and others do not. Is there a connection between people's sinfulness and what seems to be random suffering?

There were two great earthquakes recently in Haiti and in Chile. Haiti earthquake measured 7.0 on the magnitude scale and hit the capital city of Port Au Prince. It killed some 230,000 people. The earthquake in Chile was much larger and measured 8.8 and killed 800

people that we know of so far. It also triggered a Tsunami in the Pacific Ocean, which devastated some coastlines in the area. But did you know that there were also earthquakes off the coast of Okinawa, Japan (on the same day as the earthquake in Chile!) and recently another in southern Taiwan? The one in Japan measured 7.0 and the one in Taiwan measured 6.4. People have naturally begun to ask the question about connections. Is there a connection between the four earthquakes? Is there a connection between their intensities? Could one earthquake have somehow affected the occurrence of another? People always ask such questions. We are forever asking if we have done something to deserve either the good fortune or the bad fortune that has befallen us. We are always asking about what connections might exist between our bad habits and our health, or if we have done anything to deserve getting so terribly sick that we have to be hospitalized. People want connections because they want to be able to control their lives as much as possible. If we determine that a connection exists between our individual practices and world events, then we can somehow control and manipulate our world so that we remain safe and live long and happy lives.

While it is true that if we keep on eating those jelly doughnuts and slugging down that Mountain Dew all day long that we will gradually see a change in our belt size, it is not true that there is any connection between the earthquakes and between the sin of the Galileans and Jerusalemites and their fate.

The earthquakes that have recently occurred have no connection to each other because from everything we know about earthquakes they “are sporadic and unpredictable,” according to Dr. Kurt Frankel of the Georgia Institute of Technology. If all these earthquakes had not happened so quickly and recently we might not be asking the question about connections. But earthquakes happen every day. Most are small and insignificant to our lives. But sometimes they do great damage. But these four earthquakes were too far apart from each other both in time and space for anyone to draw a connection between them. The earth’s crust is not as rigid and some

people believe, but rather fluid and one great earthquake on one side of the Pacific does not transmit it's tremors to the opposite side. Had the quakes been much closer to each other there might have been a connection, but that is not the case.

Neither is there a connection between the sinfulness of the Galileans and those killed by the tower in Jerusalem. Who knows but that it might have been a slight earthquake that toppled the tower? Does that mean that all those standing under it were especially guilty of great sins? No, says Jesus, not at all. There is no connection. Sometimes bad things happen because we are in the wrong place at the wrong time and for no other reason. The world and the universe are in constant motion and sometimes that motion affects us in terrible ways. But think if the earth stopped moving and just stood still. Life could not even exist and there would be no one to ask about connections.

We ask about connections because we are curious and desire control. We want to believe that if we can just identify this one problem and solve it, then all our other problems might be solved. We want to believe that we, we ourselves, can be in control of our fate and destiny if only we unlock the secret to earthquakes, volcanoes, and the stock market. Then we'd sit on our high hill safe and secure in the knowledge that we had everything under control and were safe.

It won't wash, says Jesus. Life doesn't work that way. But there is deep meaning in his words that we should pay attention to and something that we can participate in it. We can't control it, we can't manipulate it, but we can participate in Christ's love and his kingdom and do the best we can. We cannot determine our own outcome either through good or bad deeds, for Christ is our judge and not we ourselves. But we can live in thankfulness and joy in the Lord that no matter what happens to us, even if a tower falls on us, we are still in God's hands and his love.

Jesus said that those unfortunate people were no greater sinners than anybody else, but that if we did not live lives of repentance, we would be destroyed. If we do not live with humility

and grace, we will perish just as they did. Jesus means that whatever we might think about connections, one thing is true, we had better be ready to do what is right and good all the time and not just when we think we're in trouble. We had better be prepared to ask forgiveness and grant it, to repent and restore every day, even if we think we don't have to. Our lives ought to be lived as though we knew our blood would be mingled with a pagan sacrifice and our lives would end under the rubble of a tower. We ought to be careful to live as Christ lived, for others and not ourselves, in obedience to his love, and without trying to control our own destiny.

Take a lesson from the fig tree that would not bear any fruit. If we do not exhibit the life that Christ gives us, if we do not repent and bear the fruits of faith, hope, and love it may be that someday we'll be cut off before we have a chance to do some good. So we should always take the chance. We should always do good, even if we think evil has been done to us. Never pass up the chance to do what is right even though you may not feel like it....

... because there is gospel in manure. Yup, you heard me right, there is gospel in manure. Jesus said that when the owner of the fig tree wanted to cut it down, the gardener asked that he dig around it and put manure on it and maybe it'd produce some fruit in due time. The gardener wanted to give the fig tree another chance to do its job. He would cultivate and fertilize it and maybe that would help. There's not a whole lot of gospel in these stories of Jesus today. I guess it's Lent and we get the stories about repentance and self-examination, and that's mostly law. But there is gospel in what the gardener said. There is gospel in the manure because fig trees need to be fed in order to produce. We need a gardener who will trim our branches, loosen up the soil, lay down manure and let the rains come and then we can soak up the nutrients and the moisture and blossom and flourish and when God comes looking for his fruit he will find us producing what he made us for.

If not, he'll cut us down, but not yet. Not yet. There is still a chance for us. No, we don't assume that if we do good works and produce fruit that somehow God is obliged to reward us.

That's not what we teach. There is no correlation between how many good deeds we do and how much God loves us. There is no connection between how few good deeds we do and if we die in a terrible accident or earthquake. God's love remains constant and is the bedrock of our lives. But if we ignore that foundation and refuse to understand how our lives are dependent on that love and if we harbor our anger and resentment and maintain our complete innocence, then we will be like fig trees without figs, apple trees without apples, Christians without Christ.

But there is gospel in this lesson and these stories. It's in the fertilizer. It's in the love of Christ that will advocate on our behalf, give us more time, more opportunity, more tender-loving care, and maybe just maybe we'll start to find out what it is we should have been doing all along. That's the connection we should think about, not whether towers and earthquakes and sacrifices are related, but if we are connected to Christ and his love. That's the connection that Jesus wants us to make. If we are connected to him, then the whole world can collapse and we'll be fine. If we're connected to him, then we'll let go of our controlling ways and let God run his universe the way he wants and not the way we want. We'll get a lot more figs that way. Amen.