



"Barren or Bearing?"
Scripture – Luke 13:1-9
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, March 20, 2022

In her book, *No Cure for Being Human*, Kate Bowler notes that "American culture has popular theories about how to build a perfect life. You can have it all if you just learn how to conquer your limits. There is infinity lurking somewhere at the bottom of your inbox or in the stack of self-help books on the bedside table...(These books) are written by spiritual guides who promise to reveal God's single plan and purpose for your life. "Trust God and the path will reveal itself." ...There are bucket lists galore...and calendars with rituals to eradicate inefficiencies; and writing journals juiced with visionary wisdom from gurus and titans of industry. These are the formulas for a meaningful life... (However, Bowler says) the truth that is somewhere inside of me says: there is no formula. We live and we are loved and we are gone."¹

Bowler reminds us that what happens to us in life is not simply up to us. The choices we make definitely matter. They play an enormous role in shaping our lives. However, there are also factors beyond us that can shape our lives regardless of the decisions we make.

Bowler knows this because she is a brilliant historian and compassionate mother of a young son, but out of nowhere tumors developed across her colon and liver. She lost 30 pounds in five months. She often doubled over in pain. The day before her surgery she received a phone call from a doctor's assistant who informed her – over the phone! – that she had stage four cancer. The day after surgery, when the doctor visited her she asked about her odds of living. He said that people with stage four colon cancer have a 14 percent chance of survival. She was flattened but managed to ask, "What does survival mean in this context?" He replied, "Two years."

The decisions we make and the life we live matter not because we can have endless excitement or a totally fulfilling existence or control our destiny, but because our life can end before we are ready to step off the stage and before the world is ready to see us go.

Jesus pounds that point in today's Scripture reading from the Gospel of Luke. He was teaching a large crowd when some brought up a recent, disturbing event. They wanted to hear his take on it.

A group of men from Galilee were in the temple making their animal sacrifices, when Pilate's henchmen executed them on the spot. Luke hints at a gruesome scene, saying that the men's blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.

Before we jump to Jesus' answer, it helps to know that in his day – and for centuries before him – many believed that when tragedy struck it was because people deserved it. They clung to a tidy formula: sinners are punished; good people are rewarded. It is a mantra that some – even in our day – use to reassure themselves that life is predictable; that life is sane. It is a formula adopted by those who try to tamp down the anxiety that seizes them when bad things happen to *good* people – when young mothers develop cancer or children are born with a fatal disease or war throws people's lives in turmoil. The former Afghan Minister of Finance now finds himself in a foreign land trying to earn a living as an Uber driver.

It is not clear from our passage if those who questioned Jesus held this simple notion that bad things only happen to bad people, or if they were hoping he would refute it. Either way, they wanted to hear his answer to the question that rises to the surface when tragedy strikes: **Why?** Did Jesus think they had it coming to them?

Jesus responded: "Do you think these Galileans suffered this way because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" He answered his own question: "No."

There may have been some in the crowd who thought: "Well, we don't have all of the facts. These men probably did something to bring it on themselves." Most of us can empathize. Sometimes we struggle to make sense of something that makes no sense.

So Jesus brought up his own example to underscore his point. He mentioned a tragedy that was familiar to his listeners. He said, "What about those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them – do you think they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? Again, he answered, "No."

But that's not all he said, is it? After each example, in which he said the people who died were not receiving their just dues, he followed with: "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." Why would he say that? Was Jesus hedging his bet? Worse, was he flatly contradicting himself?

Here's what I think. First, I think Jesus is warning us not to pass judgment on the fate of others. Do not presume that those who suffer are receiving their due. Kate Bowler wrote about the reactions of others after she was diagnosed with cancer. Nearly everyone tried to discover a reason she has it. She says, "They want me to know, without a doubt, that there is a hidden logic to this seeming chaos."²

Can't you imagine people peppering her with questions? Did you smoke? Did you ever live in an area with high cancer rates? Were you exposed to pesticides? How about lead in the water or too much radiation?

The hard truth about life is that sometimes STUFF JUST HAPPENS. The people crushed by the tower in Siloam were simply standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Second, when Jesus calls on people to repent, he's not calling for them to drop to the ground in a guilty heap of regret. The meaning of words, change over time and regrettably, the word "repent" has been contaminated. It has acquired a harsh, judgmental tone. The word "repent" means to turn toward God. Jesus is challenging us to quit living in a way that leads you further from God and to start living in a way that will draw you closer to God.

Third, Jesus used these tragedies that were fresh on people's minds to remind them – to remind all of us – that the clock is ticking. He's saying, "Wake up. Your time on earth is limited. Don't put off what is essential until it's too late."

Then, Jesus followed with a parable. 'A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, "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?" The gardener replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; if not, you can cut it down."

The parable urges us to consider how we are like a fig tree that produces no fruit. Am I reluctant to extend compassion to others? Do I feel inadequate to help? Am I cynical about what good I can do? Is my energy too focused elsewhere to bear fruit?

Katie Patterson, who lives in Chicago, tried out a new coffee shop recently. It's just around the corner from where she was pet sitting. A friend of hers mentioned he was curious about this place so Katie decided to check it out. She says, "The décor and music are not her style, there is a fake bat hanging over the drink counter, and the names of the coffee blends are not something you would repeat in church." As she sipped her coffee, she was working on a project with a rapidly approaching deadline. She was tapping out sentences on her lap top, then deleting them. Nothing compelling was coming. She was about to pack up her things and search for a more inspiring setting. Or at least reach home before the snow got worse. Then a woman walked in. She went up to the counter, had a brief interaction, and the barista smiled and nodded and disappeared in the back room. A couple of minutes later she returned with brand-new gloves and socks. She handed them to the woman along with a hot cup of coffee and a warm smile." In that instant, Patterson's opinion of the coffee shop flipped. She thought to herself, "Good fruit only comes from good trees. If I am going to buy a \$4 coffee, I am gratified to know it is at a place that bears good fruit."³

Why delay the fruitful life you can live? Why die with a bushel full of regrets? Live in such a way that when you are gone, your family and friends will celebrate a life that bore fruit that nourished others.

None of us should simply take up space on this planet by living a barren life. Allow God's Spirit to aerate your soul with love and peace, and pour on the fertilizer of joy and hope. You will blossom and bear an abundance of nourishing fruit.

NOTES

1. Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human*, (New York: Random House, 2021), p.xiv.
2. Eric D. Barreto, "Reflections on the Lectionary," *The Christian Century*, February 27, 2019.
3. Katie Patterson, "Lenten Devotions," Fourth Presbyterian Church, March 18, 2022.