

“Bad News, Good News”

Life is filled with bad news: with troubles, sorrows, difficulties, hardships, challenges and tragedies. We all have experienced this. Many little proverbs and sayings attest to this truth—even to the fact that they seem to come in clusters. “It never rains but it pours.” “Misfortunes never come singly.” “It’s just one thing after another.” “We’re just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

There is an illustration of this truth that comes from late 19th century France. The story is comical, although I’m sure it wasn’t at the time, at least to all parties involved! The French playwright Victorien Sardou was enjoying himself at a fancy dinner party. He accidentally spilled a glass of wine on the white tablecloth. The woman sitting next to him sprinkled salt on the stain, a well-known French remedy for keeping the stain from setting. Sardou, wanting to be on the safe side in case our human superstitions might actually be true, threw a bit of the salt over his left shoulder to avoid bad luck. The salt went straight into the eye of the waiter about to serve him some chicken. The waiter dropped the platter, and the family dog pounced on the chicken. A bone got stuck in the dog’s throat, so the son of the host moved quickly to try to get it out. When he reached into the dog’s mouth, it bit him. The final point to the story: the young man’s finger had to be amputated!

We can laugh at this kind of story. But we all know stories that break our hearts. A family in my first church lost a son to a motorcycle accident. He died on his 18th birthday, after lingering in a coma for a month. That same family, several years later, lost his older brother (married and beginning to think about planning a family). He was killed in a snowmobile accident on Wonder Lake.

When I served as a student chaplain during my seminary studies, a woman living in Florida had come to the hospital where I was working, to be with her brother who was dying of cancer. While in the hospital, her own husband collapsed. He was admitted, tests were run, and late in the day of her brother’s death they were informed that her husband also had cancer, fairly far advanced.

I spent some time with a nurse on the hospice unit as she prepared the room where the brother had died. She snapped sheets around; her eyes were flashing with anger. “Some people just get more than their share! It just isn’t

right! No one should have to go through what this family is facing! It just doesn't make sense."

Did you even hear the term SNAFU? I learned it's a military term meaning: Situation normal: all fouled up. Somehow, when things go wrong, when we encounter troubles and tragedies, it just doesn't seem like a NORMAL state of affairs. We can't understand WHY these things happen. We sigh deeply and say, "It just doesn't make sense."

When things don't make any sense, sometimes we try to FORCE them to make sense. For thousands of years people have tried to make sense out of tragedy and suffering in various ways. One common way is to believe that troubles are a punishment for wrongdoing. As a hospital chaplain I ran into that view often. People would tell me they couldn't figure out what they had done wrong to deserve their pain. They'd think back over their lives, trying to find something. Actually, some people had clearly in mind something very wrong in their past, and were nearly convinced their problems were JUST punishment for those sins. On the other hand, family and friends of injured and ill people would tell me, "I can't understand why this is happening to HER. She never hurt anyone or did a mean thing in her life!"

People have been thinking this way a long time. Jesus ran into it. In our Scripture for today, we read of people coming to tell him about some tragic current events. Pontius Pilate was known to be brutal and harsh. He would send his personal troops into crowds at Jewish religious festivals, disguised as part of the crowd. They would stealthily kill Jewish leaders or anyone who posed a threat to Pilate's chokehold on the people. It may have been just such an incident that brought the people to Jesus with the tale of innocent blood being spilled with the blood of ritual religious sacrifices.

These people asked Jesus to explain why such a thing would happen. Perhaps they even voiced their suspicion that those killed must have done some kind of evil to deserve their fate. Jesus immediately rejected that idea. He brought up another tragic current event, the collapse of a tower which killed 18 innocent bystanders. In these two instances we have two of the principal kinds of tragedies: those resulting from human evil and violence, and those resulting from random events (accidents, illnesses, natural disasters, all seeming to strike without rhyme or reason.)

Jesus made it plain that in BOTH these types of situations the tragedy is NOT punishment for sin. “Do you think these people were worse sinners than anyone else?” he asked. Notice, Jesus didn’t say they weren’t sinners. They were. We ALL are. They just weren’t WORSE sinners than others. The magnitude of our suffering is NOT related to the magnitude of our sins.

Jesus then went on to say, “But unless you repent, you will perish.” What’s THAT about? I believe Jesus knew we might go off on a tangent, as we struggle to understand his teaching. If “being good” doesn’t protect us from harm or tragedy, then why bother? We can easily become jaded, disillusioned, bitter, calloused. Jesus wants us to know that EVEN THOUGH our actions cannot control events around us, and will not guarantee a life free of suffering, IT STILL MATTERS how we live. It matters immensely.

Jesus wants us to know that without God’s spirit alive inside us, around us, before us, leading and guiding, we cannot make it. We will perish. We will dry up inside and live life as an empty shell, a withered husk. We MUST turn to God to receive what we need to live--- to live through the joyful times AND through the sorrows. “Being good” does not protect us from suffering, but “being with God” carries us through suffering.

The pervasiveness and persistence of sorrows in our lives is indeed BAD NEWS. God’s ability to carry us THROUGH such times is GOOD NEWS. Jesus continues to amplify that GOOD NEWS in his next teaching, the parable of the fig tree.

The owner of a vineyard went out into his fields to survey their fruitfulness. In Israel fruit trees were often planted among the grapevines. The owner was distressed; he had given one of his trees three years to produce fruit, without success.

Christian scholar K. Elizabeth Rennie provides interesting background for this parable. Leviticus 19 contains a verse which forbids the gathering of fruit from newly-planted trees for the first three years. Whoa. That gives us a different perspective as we study this parable. I always thought the owner was upset because he had given the tree a great deal of time to produce and still it hadn’t. Rennie’s comments show us the owner had given the tree the “bare minimum allotment in which to show its worth.” Yet the owner was

unwilling to give the tree any more time. “Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?”

Then another person appears in Jesus’ story: the man who took care of the vineyard. What about these two characters: the owner of the vineyard, and the man who took care of it? We might initially think the owner represents God, after all, God does own the whole universe! But I’m pretty sure that’s not the case. I think the owner of the vineyard represents US, our tendencies to want quick solutions, to give up on people, to see them as expendable “throw aways”. Who IS God then, in this parable? The God made known to me in Jesus is clearly the “man who took care of the vineyard.” This is what God is like. God stops human hands from discarding precious life. God says, “Wait! I’ll fertilize this tree. I’ll dig around it so nutrients and water can reach the roots. I’ll tend it carefully. Then we’ll see if it bears fruit.”

That’s what God is like. We are ALL in the hands of the man who took care of the vineyard. And I see him managing to get **another** year for that tree, if one more year isn’t quite enough. God NEVER GIVES UP on any of us, no matter how hard we persist in our destructive and fruitless ways. He is the caretaker of the vineyard whose grace gives us another chance.

That’s another piece of GOOD NEWS. A final piece of good news is this. We are able to bear fruit. We all can do this. None of us is left out. We are made to bear fruit.

We are trees in God’s garden. We are NOT promised a life without storms. We will face and go through storms, no matter what we do. We ARE promised being rooted in God will give us the strength to make it through storms. We are promised tender, loving care from the gardener. We’ve been planted to bear fruit. What fruit? Not the world’s fruit: success, money, power. The fruit God looks for on our branches are these: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22) Through his Spirit this is possible. What a wonder, what a joy.

Let us pray: Thank you, God for being the man who takes care of the vineyard. Help us to know we are safe in your care, even though bad things happen to us and people we love that we cannot understand or explain. Help us to receive your tender care that provides sunlight, water and nutrients we need. May this care help us weather both storms and droughts, as well as the gentle rain and gleaming sunshine. And may we bear fruit, when the season comes to bear fruit, fruit of your own Spirit. Amen.