

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV

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Luke 13:1-9

... unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. (Luke 13:5 N.R.S.V.)

Is God Judgmental?

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and my Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life.

Complacency is a term that I first heard used when I was in the Air Force. They didn't want us to get so used to dealing with explosives that we lost our respect for them and became careless. Don't become complacent, they warned. Always do your safety checks, every time.

The Air Force has a very good safety record, because they stress those safety drills and checks all of the time. Still occasionally someone would become complacent and do something stupid.

One of the crews in our shop was called out one day to do an electrical test on a newly installed wing tank. The F-4 fighter is designed with small electrically primed charges that will blow a wing tank away from the plane while it is in flight. That makes the plane faster if it has to engage in an aerial dogfight.

Anyway, the crew that day did all of their safety checks, made sure that the explosive charges were removed from the tank and that all the safety pins were in place. They turned on the power, flipped the switch and it didn't work. It was a faulty tank.

So the crew came back to the shop and the tank crew went back to the plane and changed out the wing tank. The first crew was then called back out. What they didn't know was that this new tank had explosive charges in it, and worse the safety pin had been removed. But the crew had already been on this plane just a few minutes ago and they were in a hurry. They got complacent. They immediately turned on the power, and the guy in the cockpit flipped the switch. The wing tank operated as advertized, with a loud bang, it separated from the plane and bounced off the concrete floor.

Fortunately, the tank did not catch fire and no one was hurt. But they could have been. That should not have happened, several people had to skip safety checks and make assumptions for that accident to happen. But it did happen because people got complacent.

I was thinking about that incident while working on this passage from Luke. It is in many ways a shocking passage for us. We have gotten so used to thinking about Jesus as our Savior, our friend, our buddy. That we are shocked at the sharp edges we see here in Jesus.

Some Galileans were worshiping God and the Roman army killed them right there in church. The people come to Jesus saying, "How could this happen? Were these people terrible sinners then?"

Jesus comes across to our modern sensibilities here as cold. He says, "No they were not any worse sinners than you are. And if you don't repent, you will all perish too."

Wow, what do we do with that?

First let me point out that Jesus did not address the question of "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Instead Jesus uses this tragedy to point to a great reality. Forget about whether these people somehow brought this on themselves. Instead use this to remind yourselves not to play fast and loose with God. There will come a time when you will stand before God and be judged. If you do not repent, you will perish for all eternity.

The reality is that we all too easily become complacent with God. We make God into a harmless, doting grandfather figure, and forget that God is also our judge. We must render account of our actions or lack of actions to God.

People today don't want to hear that. What seems to be popular is an image of God as our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always blesses and never curses.

By way of contrast let me read you a short excerpt from "Spiritual Exercises" by Nikos Kazantzakis, this was published in 1927.

My prayer is not the whimpering of a beggar nor a confession of love. Nor is it the trivial reckoning of a small tradesman: Give me and I shall give you.

My prayer is the report of a soldier to his general: This is what I did today, this is how I fought to save the entire battle in my own sector, these are the obstacles I found, this is how I plan to fight tomorrow.

My God and I are horsemen galloping in the burning sun or under drizzling rain. Pale, starving, but unsubdued, we ride and converse.

"Leader!" I cry. He turns his face towards me, and I shudder to confront his anguish.

I don't recommend that view of God, I merely wanted to point out how much differently someone viewed God a mere 80 years ago. As a matter of fact, even that view of God is far too earth bound. God is not merely our general, God is our creator. God holds our very existence in his hands. God is our judge. God holds our lives now and for all eternity.

Yet, maybe there is yet hope for our society. It is true that we have grown complacent. But it is also true that some people have started to wake up. It is true that the number one complaint against the church is that "the church is too judgmental." It sometimes seems that young adults don't want to be held to any standard higher than their own conscious. But there are places where change is evident.

I was reading about a church in California that is growing by leaps and bounds. It is a church in which the average age is less than 30. One reporter asked the pastor how the church could be so attractive to young people. The pastor said, "I think you've got a generation of young adults that never had anybody look them into the eyes and say directly to them, in love, 'You stink, you really, really stink.'"

Wil Willimon comments, "For so long we have told people that they are basically good. That they're making progress, and that they are nice people who always mean the best. But they know better. Are we now at the point where we might speak the truth? Might we once again speak of judgement and repentance and of our need as sinners for a gracious, forgiving God?"

Is this good news for us? You bet it is. God cares enough about us to correct us. To tell us we are wrong and that we are killing ourselves. Look around you, the attitude that we can make up the rules for ourselves is tearing families apart, lives are being ruined, souls are being lost. We need help.

I can tell you as a parent myself how hard it is to discipline your children. It takes a lot of time, not to mention energy to explain to a child why certain behaviors are inappropriate, to set rules, to maintain consistent consequences. It is so much easier to just ignore the bad behavior.

My heart goes out to single parents, many of whom are working at more than one job. I am in awe of those who take the time, who summon the tremendous amounts of energy necessary to correct their children. To hold their children accountable, because they love them.

The good news is that we serve a God who loves us even more. God will accept us just as we are. God will save us just as we are. But God loves us far too much to leave us in our sin.

God refuses to leave us alone. God keeps coming to us, calling us to change our ways, convicting us of sin and wrong doing, persuading us of his better way. Like a good teacher or coach, God will not let up on us. God is not afraid to express his disappointment when we give less than our best. Because he wants the best for us.

As the music plays, listen for what God is saying to you this morning.

Amen.