

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Surrounded by Bad Theology

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week I pointed out some of the people, groups, and forces arrayed in opposition to Jesus and the Gospel he was spreading. One of the best tools of those forces against Jesus and the Gospel, especially for his religious opponents, is the tool of bad theology. Unfortunately, bad theology is just as prevalent today as it was 2,000 years ago, perhaps even worse!

The particular flavor of bad theology being used in our text today is still found in much of Christianity and Judaism now. This is the bad theology of punitive divine justice. And not only is this bad theology, but it is used to support even worse theology, namely substitutionary atonement theory (which, I'm sorry to say, came out of Reformation theology). But I'll get to that bad theology a little later; we'll start with the punitive divine justice found in Luke 13.

Like a lot of bad theology, punitive divine justice can sound reasonable at first. After all, God is the source of justice and we have lots of examples in scripture of God's wrath raining down on people, tribes, nations, etc. And, let's be honest, it describes a system that definitely appeals to humanity (which should be the first clue for us that it's bad theology!). However, many of those examples of divine wrath get contradicted elsewhere, which is when we need to implement our understanding of the "Gospel within the gospel." Or, when scripture seems to disagree with/contradict itself, we turn to what we understand to be the direct words of Jesus. The Incarnated Word of God, Jesus Christ, rules over all other words of Scripture.

As a brief aside, I do want to share part of the basis of the interpretative understanding of the Gospel within the gospel. We read in the Formula of Concord, one of the foundational books of the Lutheran church: "Now there is no more faithful and more reliable interpreter of the words of Jesus Christ than the Lord Christ himself. He understands his own words and his heart

and intention best.”¹ Lutherans measure the gospel, and I would argue all of scripture, against the Incarnated Word of God, Jesus Christ...his teachings, actions, and very life.

Back to punitive divine justice and Christ’s dismissal of it in our text today. The crowds ask a common religious question at the start of Luke 13, why did this bad thing happen? Why were these Galileans killed and their blood used to profane their sacrifice? The underlying question that Jesus responds to is: did they deserve it? Or were they being divinely punished for something they, or their forbearers, did? At least the crowds in Luke’s gospel are not so gauche as to specifically ask the question the way the disciples do in regarding the man born blind in John’s Gospel: “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”²

This is the heart of punitive divine justice: if something bad happens to someone, it must be God punishing them for their sins (or their parents’ sins). This bad theology is quite appealing because it allows us to judge other people’s sins and compare ourselves to them. I rebel against this bad theology because it is incongruent with my understanding of a loving and kind God. I mean come on, in John 3:16-17 we’re told that God so **loved** the world, and that Jesus did **not** come to condemn the world, but rather to save it. Or to stay in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells the parable of the lost son in Luke 15 in which the father’s love is so extravagant and abundant, that it is more than enough to overcome the son’s brokenness.

I believe in a God of love and grace, not one that would punish people via kings or falling towers. Jesus makes this very point in our text today. Things happen in this world. Towers fall, kings kill. You never know what might happen to you. So, in the meantime, why don’t you work on your relationship with God and with your neighbors by being repentance people. Own up to your brokenness. Admit your mistakes. Let go of your grudges. Live out the grace and love that you hope for yourself! Bear fruit!

It seems to me that much of what is laid at the feet of punitive divine justice is simply the consequences of broken systems set up by a broken humanity. Rather than blaming natural disasters on X, Y, or Z, as far too many Christians like to do (I’m looking at you, Pat Robertson, and your ilk). Perhaps

¹ Kolb, R., & Wengert, T. J. (2002). Solid Declaration, Article VII: Holy Supper. In *The Book of Concord* (p. 601). Fortress Press.

² John 9:2b (NRSV)

we should understand that increasing natural disasters are a result of human caused climate change. Let us repent of that and try to reconcile with creation. How? Let's work to stop climate change! Let's hold polluters accountable, let's consume less, let's be mindful of the waste we create. That is the repentance and reconciliation that Christ calls for!

I mentioned earlier that substitutionary atonement theory is a natural outcome of punitive divine justice. This theory says that since God is mean and wrathful, God must punitively punish sinners and their offspring. Given that, the only way to satisfy God's ultimate bloodlust is for a "perfect" sacrifice. So, Jesus, God's only beloved(?) son, takes on human flesh and form to take humanity's place in the face of God's wrath. Okay, I may not be presenting substitutionary atonement theory in the best possible light. But there's a reason opponents of it, like myself, refer to it as the theory of divine child abuse. It's **bad** theology! It paints God as unloving and ungracious, and I just can't go there.

And you will find this theory at the heart of a lot of Christian's operative theology. That sort-of desperate clinging to works righteousness or orthodoxy to try to be "worthy" of Jesus' sacrifice. All that popular language of being washed in the blood of Jesus and such pithy things. It's all substitutionary atonement theory, and it all paints God as unloving and ungracious and I cannot stand it!

But Pastor Jon, you might say, *simul justus et peccator!* We are at the same time saint and sinner; we are broken sinners deserving of punishment! God hates sin! And of course, all of that is correct. I just don't let those facts warp my view of God as loving and gracious. God does hate sin, but time and again in scripture, and in my own experience, God is merciful and loving. God is as quick to forgive as the prodigal father in Luke 15 (who doesn't even let the lost son finish his confession!). And, I would argue, we do experience the consequences of our broken sinfulness; I just don't feel the need to ascribe them to God! When I sin, I harm others, myself, creation, and God. And there are often natural consequences that arise from my sins. I find myself cut off from others, myself, creation, and God. So if the terrible consequences of my sin are a natural result of the sin itself, then we don't have to blame God for them; it's much more accurate to blame myself for them. Ah ha! Perhaps this is the reason we engage in the mental gymnastics of substitutionary atonement theory to avoid the knowledge that the only ones we can blame for our sin is...ourselves.

Well, if Jesus didn't die in order to make substitutionary atonement theory work, then why did he die? Let's go back to that Gospel within the gospel piece I shared earlier. Why does Jesus himself say he goes to the cross? We get a clue to that in Luke 9:21b-27 (NRSV): "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.' Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words, of them the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. But truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God.'"

It seems to me that Jesus is teaching that following him involves being true to the self, the true self, the self that can walk the Way of Christ, the self that rests in God as opposed to the self that seeks after other things. We can gain the whole world, but if we lose our true selves, it's all for nothing. Jesus goes to the cross because he refuses to lose himself. He will not give up his values. He will not stop preaching and teaching God's love and grace for all. He will not be silenced or made ashamed of the gospel; and that is why he is killed by the powers that be. The powers that we generally prefer to worship than a bloody and broken brown man on a cross who died because humanity hates to be told our ways are wrong and broken.

Jesus is producing fruit, because that's what a fig tree that is true to itself will do. Are we producing fruit? Not in a works righteousness way, but rather; are we willing to be who God made us to be? Are we willing to proclaim the love and grace of God even in the face of hatred and violence? Repent or perish sounds like a threat, but it's not. It's just the way things are. Jesus is encouraging us to be who we were made to be, blessed and beloved children of God who are concerned with love, grace, mercy, and justice. Made to rest in God, and trusting that no matter what we might face, God has faced it too. That's a theory I can subscribe to: Jesus took on human flesh and form to show us how to be who God made us to be, even in the face of violence and death. All to show us how to be our true selves and to prove that no matter what we face, God faces it too. God is with us in every pit, every valley of darkness, and every shadow of death we find ourselves in. And God is there with love, grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Amen.