

**CLENCHED FISTS AND OPEN HANDS: A LENTEN JOURNEY
THE STONE OF IMPATIENT JUDGMENT**

**March 7, 2010, Third Sunday in Lent
Highlands Presbyterian Church**

**Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9
Rev. Judy Hoffhine**

Christians jump to conclusions. I think it is because we believe that God's grace is sufficient for everything that happens in life. So any catastrophe, transition, or challenge can be understood through the lens of God's love. Everything has potential for good in it. God is somewhere in the midst of every happening. Someone told me to stop feeling sad about the recent earthquakes and their damage; that all is in God's hands. I was not able to stop those feelings, nor did I want to.

Sometimes, we make assumptions that do not add up. Jesus talked about reconciling with enemies in today's gospel reading. Several people chimed in and told him about the Jews who had been killed by Pilate while they were sacrificing animals in the temple. They were furious and indignant that the Roman governor would do such a thing! By our standards today it is considered an injustice and violation of human rights. We shuttle our Secretary of State all over the world about injustices such as these.

Jesus, as usual, surprised the people. He immediately shifted the conversation from politics to faith. He not only discussed that incident, but also brought up the tragic death of eighteen people killed in Jerusalem when a tower fell on them. His topic was not about politics or city government keeping the tower in good repair. His emphasis was on God's justice and the need for everyone to repent. We need to be prepared. Were they prepared? Was God punishing the dead for some sin they had committed? By his answers we can assume this was the question the people were asking. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? Did they do something wrong to cause this?

From this question about cause and effect – our causing God's effect – Jesus tells a story as only he can. At first glance, it seems irrelevant, but of course, it is right to the point. He relates a conversation between a gardener and a landowner. The landowner is fed up with a fig tree that is not producing fruit. He accuses it of wasting soil! I think Jesus meant some humor here, so I smile! He tells the gardener to chop it down.

The gardener, a patient person, accustomed to working with soil and weather, respectfully requests one more year to concentrate on this tree, to dig and fertilize. One more year, one more chance to do his work and cooperate with nature. We are not given the reply. We do not know if the landowner agreed, but we commend the gardener for making a case, for respectfully holding up an alternative to the one who cared about immediate profit more than one tree's development. Have any of you been affected by downsizing? Have any of you fought for your job or someone else's? Sometimes you feel like an immature fig tree, don't you?

Life is dangerous. We do not know what will fall on us or from us. We want answers now. We want to know why things happen and when they will happen. We want proof of God's existence and care for us, and we want it to be apparent in our lives. We are like the questioners and the landowner. We push. We are afraid, because we do not control everything.

We are also asking the wrong question. Jesus takes us from seeing God as fatalistic judge to seeing God as the one who loves the second chance and the repentant who asks for that second chance. Life is a process of maturing. Life does not have an end, even in death. These days we are encouraged to do random acts of kindness. Sometimes some very wonderful things happen spontaneously that are good and kind, and they nurture us. Sometimes things happened that are terrible and violent – a huge icicle falls on someone and causes a severe head injury. Did that person's sin cause that to happen? That is not the issue for God. The issue is whether he is in partnership with God. In all circumstances, we who confess God, are in partnership with God, no matter what happens, good or bad. It is the partnership that is important, not each particular event. We have much fruit to bear, but our purpose is to be, simply to be what God made us to be, and to be that with as much beauty, grace, and love as possible.

We carry heavy stones in our hands when we expect life to be fair. My friends, God does not operate this world like a puppet show. We are not on a stage that God manipulates. Not every action is controlled. God chose to love us and to give us free will. We could say that God gives us enough rope to hang ourselves. But God loves the second chance, the one who turns around and returns to God.

The other side of that same stone is this: God does not want to be controlled by us, and don't we do a great job at that! God does not appreciate our "why me, why now" questions, though, like the gardener, God has great patience. Moses did not enter the Promised Land because he tried to tell God what to do. God demands obedience. God expects argument and wrestling. God expects adoration, confession, praise, thanksgiving, and supplication. God doesn't expect to be commanded.

God also expects us to love life and produce some kind of fruit, and God will be patient as we work that out. That raises the whole question of what our passion really is; because out of that deep love for life, our fruit will grow. Caring for that passion, fertilizing it, loving it, pruning it, will produce the fruit God seeks.

We must keep in mind one serious limitation. Even though God is very patient with us as we repent and cultivate, we do not live forever. We are mortal. We shall all die. That clear limitation should motivate us to focus how we will live this precious life. Survivors of illnesses and injuries often live with more passion than the rest of us. Our mortality calls us to take seriously that which really excites us in life. God speaks to us through those voices of the Holy Spirit. When we pay attention and follow them, the heavy stones of judgment and impatience lighten considerably. We unclench our angry judgmental fists in order to reach for fulfillment

and joy. We leave those other issues to God, because they don't really matter anymore. What matters is our partnership with God, and the way we respond to God's love and call.

We can drop and bury this stone completely with no more understanding. It is in Paul's letter to the Romans, fourteenth chapter: "If we live, we live unto the Lord; and if we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's." If we who are believers are murdered, we are still in partnership with God. According to Jesus', it is not a tragedy. If a tower falls on us while we are walking down the street and we are the Lord's, we are still in partnership with God. Life with God is what matters to Jesus. If we are like a fig tree, God will help us grow and produce. But should we be chopped down early and not meet human expectation, we are still God's. God owns the tree, the field, the sun and the rain, the landowner, and the gardener: all are God's. Should we pick up the cross and follow Jesus, even to a place of torture and death, we still belong to God. God's mercy and God's judgment are always in conversation with each other. God's love and forgiveness always conquer.

Lay down your stone of quick impatient judgment and criticism of others, of yourself, of life in general, of God. Lay down the stone, pick up the cross, for that burden is light and even joyful, when you are in partnership with God. Amen.