

Sermon – Luke 13:1-9
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Grace Lutheran Church
3 Lent – Year C
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“Just Deserts”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace this morning in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. There are, no doubt, those among you who glanced at the sermon title and those to yourselves, “Well, Pastor Lyle finally had a good idea. Just desserts? Yes, please!” Well, I would simply remind you that it’s Lent, so don’t you dare! Others might be thinking, “Well, Pastor blew that one. Just deserts is supposed to have two esses, not one. Otherwise, it reads, “just deserts.” Unless he means we’re just in the desert, which would probably make more sense for Lent than eating nothing but desserts all the time.” But no, I do mean deserts, and yes, there’s only one s in the word. It’s an archaic little piece of our language, this desert, which refers neither to sand dunes nor sandwich cookies; desert means something that is deserved. And while we don’t use this word that much anymore, we have internalized the concept that the world is a place of just deserts – that people get what they have coming, sooner or later, and that if something comes to get them, well, they probably deserved it.
2. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus is approached by some folks with breaking news. Pontius Pilate, the tyrannical Roman governor, is at it again. This time, in an horrific act of religious violence, Pilate sent soldiers to massacre some Galileans who were fulfilling their religious obligations through animal sacrifice. By the time the soldiers were done, no one could have distinguished the blood of the animals from the blood of the human victims. Jesus throws

out another news story, recalling a recent tragedy when the Tower of Siloam toppled over, killing eighteen Jerusalemites when it fell. And Jesus knows what's on their mind: What did these Galileans and these Jerusalemites do to deserve this, for they *must* have been getting their just deserts? They must have been worse sinners than those around them in order for God to allow this to happen to them.

3. Several years ago, our family decided to cut the cord and get rid of cable. This poses its challenges, of course, particularly when there's a game on that I want to watch. But the blessings have far outweighed the challenges, and that's mostly because I no longer have to watch cable news. It's bad enough listening to everyone blame the other side all the time. But what's even worse are the sorts of things that get said by your standard assortment of bloviating "experts" when a tragedy – natural or human-made – occurs. Without fail, someone will be trotted out in front of a camera to declare, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the tragedy in question was the will of God; specifically, the will of an angry, wrathful God who is punishing America for her sins. God, after all, is just, so God must be handing out just deserts!
4. Such thinking can be comforting for a while. After all, if bad things are happening to those people, they're just getting what they deserve. And if bad things aren't happening to me, well, I must deserve that, too! But such fictions can't last, unless we are truly to be left with no God but one who delights in meting out punishment, hurling airplanes into buildings and sending hurricanes against coastlines. And this is exactly where Jesus does not leave us. Jesus does not say, "yeah, that crowd performing its sacrifices was the worst – God used Pilate to put them out of their misery." Or, "it sure was lucky those eighteen losers were in the same place at the same time so that God could knock over that tower and wipe them out." No, Jesus refuses to entertain the notion that these victims of violence or disaster were any

- worse than anyone else. Why do such things happen? Jesus never really gets around to saying, except to point out that God's not in that line of work.
5. And why not? Because if God were spending time devising disaster for the wicked, there wouldn't be time for God to do anything else! Jesus, in his conversation with the crowds, does not simply shrug his shoulders and say, "Yeah, man, stuff happens." Instead, he urges his hearers to stop trying to figure out what "those" people did wrong but to start looking at themselves. Time to stop searching for specks in the eyes of others and notice that you've got a big, ol' log jammed in your own eye socket. "No," Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish."
 6. God, Jesus says, simply isn't in the disaster-delivery business. God is not your waitress bringing a platter of just deserts. While it is what we, in our willful captivity to sin, deserve, it is not what God is serving up. Instead, Jesus tells us what fruitless fig trees we have become, worthy of nothing but being chopped down. But does the axe fall? No, for Jesus the gardener intercedes for us, pleads for us, to be spared that we might – with the right care and the right love – begin to bear fruit worthy of the Kingdom of God.
 7. And amazingly enough, this gardener love us enough to become our fertilizer, giving himself up to death that our yearning, hungry roots might finally find food at the foot of the cross and begin to produce fruit. Jesus doesn't tell us why Pontius Pilate spills so much blood; instead, he lets Pilate spill the blood of the Son of God for our salvation. Jesus doesn't tell us why towers sometimes fall down; instead, he lets the weight of sin and death crush him for our sake. We are not finally given an answer to our "Why" questions. Why do so many bad things happen? Instead, Jesus becomes the answer to a new question, a "Who" question. Jesus is the One who suffers with us when we suffer, that we might know that we are no longer under God's judgment but, under the cross, covered by Christ's love. And covered and claimed by such

love, we can stop trying to figure out what others did to deserve their suffering and instead try to, you know, help them when they suffer, reaching out with branches that bloom from the tree of life itself.

8. Some years ago, when he was senior minister of Riverside Church in New York City, William Sloane Coffin suffered tragedy. His son, Alex, was driving in a terrible storm, lost control of his car, and plunged to his death in Boston Harbor. The following Sunday, Dr. Coffin preached about his son's death. He thanked people for their condolences, for food brought to the house, for an arm around his shoulder when there were no words that would help. But he also raged; he raged about the well-meaning folks who had hinted that Alex's death was God's will: "Do you think it was God's will that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper...that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of 'frosties' too many? Do you think it was God's will that there are no streetlights along that stretch of the road and no guardrail separating the road and Boston Harbor? The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is, 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."
9. Jesus, you see, has not come to tell us whose fault it all is, except for the hard truth that we, in our sin, are all to blame. Instead, Jesus has come to dig around in the manure, to bury himself in the muck of our lives that, through him, we might find growth, bear fruit, and bloom with Christ's loving compassion when tragedy comes. Thank God we don't get our just deserts. No, we get grace – a grace that redeems and transforms our lives and our communities, so that we can respond to pain with mercy instead of judgment, and so that we can finally turn off the bad-news voices of this world. They have no answers, anyway. But we do; His name is Jesus, cast down into the

mucky manure of this world so that we can grow together in Christ and his love. Amen.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.