

Yesterday's Hartford Courant had a picture of a young boy playing in destroyed streets in Syria. I was deeply moved as I studied the photo and realized that the boy must have known war every year of his life. Bombed buildings, rubble-filled streets, and now, probably for only a short time, there is a cease-fire so that he can play among the broken stones there. I think of what my own children grew up knowing, and the unfairness of it all hits hard. Does that little boy deserve the world in which he was born? On the flip side, do my children deserve the many opportunities they have received? Life is not fair.

Thornton Wilder wrote a novel entitled *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, which was set in a little village in South America. Every morning the villagers would make their way across a bridge to go and work in the fields. One day, without any warning, the bridge snapped and the 6 people who were on the bridge fell to their deaths.

In the village there lived a priest who was inundated with questions about why these people had been killed and not those who had gone across earlier or those who had planned to cross later that day. "Aha!," he said, "I will do research into these people's lives and show why it was that these particular six individuals were on the bridge when it fell. I will prove to everyone that if one does bad things, then bad things are going to happen to that one, and that good will come to the one who does good things."

For weeks the priest studied every aspect of the lives of those people who had died, and also the lives of those who had not died. Finally, everyone gathered to hear his report. He announced, "Those six people who died were no worse and no better than anyone else in this village. God does indeed allow the sun and the rain to fall on the just and on the unjust."

Such conclusions may be accurate, may even make sense, but they certainly leave us with a sense of life's unfairness. Why doesn't God keep a balance sheet, we might ask, so that good can come to those (hopefully us!) who deserve it and evil befall those others who are bad sinners?

In Luke 13, folks approached Jesus with some bad news: "Pilate killed some of our people just as they were making their sacrifice. So the blood of the martyrs mingled with the blood of their bulls. What do you think of that?"

Jesus responded: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" Then he changed the subject: "...but unless you repent you too shall perish." Jesus did this not once, but twice.

A century ago, scholar Abraham Edersheim speculated that the 18 Jesus mentioned who died had been working on Pilate's aqueduct when they part of it fell on them. Pilate, according to the historian Josephus, had taken money from the Temple treasury in order to build his aqueduct, much to the horror of the Jews. So the Jews were easily able to see any disaster connected with this project as punishment from God. But Jesus said no. No matter what happened, or how it

happened, it wasn't a judgment from God.

Many Jews in Jesus' day had come to believe that Pilate was evil - since he represented Rome - and that they themselves, being Jews whose nation was occupied by a foreign land, were righteous. Jesus told them, in essence, to stop pointing their fingers at the guilt or innocence of others and instead start looking at their own relationship with God. Stop worrying about the evil in those killed while offering a sacrifice and those killed in Siloam, and look at your own life. Repent, turn to God, or YOU will be destroyed.

Back in 1988 a drought struck the southwestern portion of Minnesota so that over half the crops were damaged. Farmers were unable to bear the burden of such a bad year and many went bankrupt. Traveling preachers--probably many with good intentions--went through the area "revivaling." One of their most popular themes, however, was that the area churches had been unfaithful. "This drought," they said, "Is sent by God because of your sins. Repent, and God will send the rain again."

The logical question in response to this quickly becomes, Could it be that the people of Southwest Minnesota sinned so much more than the commodity traders of Chicago, who reaped huge profits from the drought?' No more than the 18 who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them. 'Were they more guilty than the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you 'no, but unless you repent you will perish.' Repent. Turn to God.

It's easy to point to others' need to make changes. The woman in a former church who was diagnosed with lung cancer and had three adult daughters, all of whom were heavy smokers. A universal reaction among the people who knew them was, "Well, maybe THIS will convince them to stop smoking!" Many have pointed to AIDS and said, "Well, no wonder this disease came about. God is punishing those people." The finger points to others too easily.

The Bible would have us pull our fingers around 180 degrees and ask, "How am *I* doing with God? Am I turning toward God every day? Am I seeking to know God and to serve God today?" In the reading from Isaiah, we heard, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!" There was no requirement that the one who would come to God be sinless or perfect. The requirements were this: thirst, hunger, and not enough money to pay for what was going to be provided.

Isaiah said to the people: "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." These words were first spoken to the Jewish people who were slaves in Babylon. Search for God, call upon God, even in Babylon.. Many of those Jews who were in exile in Babylon had turned away from their roots and abandoned their faith. Some felt that God had broken the covenant when he let the Babylonians overrun Judah and destroy the Temple. They felt abandoned by God, let down, and so they abandoned God in response. They had been forced to walk away from the promised land, and in the land of the Babylonians were exposed to a rich society full of all sorts of gods and new kinds of morals. While in Babylon, some of the Jewish exiles were able to make good lives, accumulating substantial amounts of money... Many others

endured a much harder life in slavery there.

To all these, the prophet spoke a word calling for repentance, for change. This word seems particularly appropriate for us today. "Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.....return to the Lord, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon... My thoughts and ways are higher than yours....Return to me, and be fed..." (pause)

How do WE stand before God? Taking a stand on something and fighting for it is often a good thing, but the most important thing is for each of us to listen to God, to draw near to God and let God satisfy our hungers and our thirsts as only God can.

Too often we Christians formulate our own criteria for what is "righteous" and then point to others who may have other criteria, and we get so caught up in the dynamics of our assessments that we may convince ourselves that we're okay, that we understand what God is about, that we're serving God enough, that we've done enough in terms of our religion... Those "right-to-lifers" who committed murder at abortion clinics convinced themselves that their cause justified their actions, even when the actions were acts of violence and hatred. I have Christian friends who were so caught up in the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980's that they never had time to attend church. They had their cause and thought that it was enough.

But was it enough? God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways..." Far from it. We need be trying to turn to God and return to God every day. Nothing else will feed us for long; nothing else will satisfy our deep thirsts; nothing else will see us through the troubles and sufferings of life.

Bad things sometimes happen. When they do, the only way we should point to the victims is to help them as we do whatever we can in the name of the God who has helped us. When disaster strikes, the best thing we can do is to remember who it is that has given life in the first place. God hasn't given us any guarantees beyond the one of God's love and trustworthiness.

When tragedy hits, we tend to want answers, not God. We seem to think that ANY suffering is unfair and undeserved... The people asked Jesus about life's fairness, but he wouldn't answer. He asked them to examine their own relationship with God.

Duke writer, Reynolds Price, told of a man he knew, a distinguished psychiatrist, who survived a terrible automobile accident. The accident left the man a paraplegic, totally dependent upon his family, depressed and suicidal. Later, he told a group about his first days after returning home from the rehabilitation hospital, days when he could find no reason to go on living.

One day, in great desperation he manipulated his wheelchair into his bedroom and closed the door. He managed to get his revolver, which was loaded, into his hand, and aimed it toward his head. For the first time in many years, he fervently prayed, "God, I can't go on like this. God, I

will make a deal with you. I am willing to go on living, for the sake of my family, if you will only do two things for me: give me some relief from the pain, and help me to better control my bladder."

The psychiatrist said that after praying that prayer it was as if he heard a thunderous reply: *NO DEAL. YOU EITHER TAKE LIFE AS IT IS, OR DIE.* "It scared me half to death. It wasn't at all what I had expected to hear from God. I dropped the gun and never considered suicide again."

The psychiatrist went on to live life as it was given to him, living many prosperous years, living to tell of his encounter with a demanding, living God whose ways are not always our ways and whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts; but also a God who can help us "take life and it is" if we will but turn to him. (I believe this was gleaned from *Pulpit Resource*, William Willimon, in 1995)

An old woman, highly educated but deeply worn by repeated tragedy in her life, told a church group, "Is life fair? I cannot say that it is. Actually, if all were fair and equal globally, United States citizens would detest the results. But still, some seem to bear burden after burden; others seem to have almost no disappointments as they proceed. For a long time I fought with the word "fair," and then I found satisfaction. I took the "I" out of "fair" and found the word FAR. I go far with God. "Fair" is not in my journey, perhaps, but God is. I go far with God. I have found, deep within, a peace which carries me through whatever comes; my deepest thirsts and most gnawing hungers have been satisfied. Go far with God. Don't look only for what you would call "fair."

May we go far with the God who is right with us now and forever. Amen.