

The 3rd Sunday in Lent (C)
March 20, 2022
Text: Luke 13:1-9

Pastor Aaron J. Couch
First Immanuel Lutheran Church
Portland, OR

Kate Bowler is a professor at Duke University, where she teaches American religious history, with a special focus on the so-called prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel is associated with people like Jim and Tammy Baker, and teaches that God wants to bless you with every good gift of health and money and success. All you need to do is believe it, pray for it, wait faithfully for it. When Kate was 35, she was diagnosed with Stage IV colon cancer, and it completely turned her world upside-down. She couldn't bear the thought of being separated from her husband and young son. She wrestled with "why" and "where is God in all this" and "what does this mean?"

Fortunately, Kate was able to participate in clinical trials for a new kind of cancer treatment, and so far, she has been responding well. She's written a book about her experience. It's called Everything Happens for a Reason; And Other Lies I've Loved. She shares about some of the struggles she's gone through, especially struggles with her faith. She struggled with wanting certainty, with expecting that life should be fair and that God should reward good people with blessings. She says that, because of her journey with cancer, she doesn't believe that anymore. She understands why so many people want to believe that way, to believe that faith holds some secret key to getting what you want in life. But she's come to believe that faith has more to do with accepting and living with the things we can't change than it does with demanding God rearrange our circumstances to meet our expectations of fairness.

Whether life is fair or not is one of the important themes in our gospel story for today, about some people who came to Jesus, telling him about some Galileans who had been killed by the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. It seems they had gone to the temple in Jerusalem to offer their sacrifices. Perhaps there was some kind of trouble, and when Pilate sent his soldiers to take control of the situation, the Galileans all wound up dead. Jesus recognized their implicit question—Why did this happen? Was God's justice at work here? Does it mean these Galileans were bad people, that they deserved what happened to them? Jesus completely rejected the whole idea that we can identify God's justice at work in the world through the bad, or good, things that happen to people.

Jesus then offered another example. There were 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam fell on them—maybe it was just an accident, or maybe it was the result of shoddy construction practices. Some people might have imagined that God's justice was at work there, that those people deserved what happened to them. But again, Jesus rejected the whole idea that when tragedies happen, it's a sign of God at work to punish bad people. Instead, Jesus asks his listeners to allow terrible news like this to help them remember how fragile and unpredictable this temporary gift of life is, and act accordingly.

Unfortunately, the punch line to Jesus' response—Unless you repent, you'll perish just like they did—doesn't translate very well across cultures and generations. Jesus wasn't saying, "Repent,

or Pilate's soldiers will kill you too, or a tower will fall on you too." I wonder whether most of our problem with hearing Jesus has to do with how the word "repent" has been distorted by generations of misuse in the church. Repenting doesn't mean confessing your misdeeds or expressing sorrow for sin as much as it means a change of mind or a change of heart. It's a kind of reorientation of life. And for Jesus' listeners, then and now, that means being oriented toward the reign of God and toward Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. Death will still come for us all, but to the person who is devoted to Jesus' way of love, death is not some tragic or absurd end. It is returning to the source of all love. It is being fully united with the One who loves us best. Being devoted to Jesus' way of love doesn't mean death won't make us feel afraid or sad or angry or confused. But it does mean being connected to the one thing that matters—love; love for God and love for neighbors; love for those close to us and love for enemies. We are all dying, but love makes this journey not only bearable, but beautiful.

For Jesus, then, what is most important is what we are doing with the time we have now—how we are living with love in this finite bit of life we have. That's what the parable of the fig tree is all about—producing the fruit of love in our lives. That fruit might look like compassion and care for neighbors in need. It might look like advocating for justice where people don't have what they need to live. It might look like healing for relationships that have been strained, or building bridges to connect with people whose lives are very different from our own. It might look like caring for the earth so it can continue to be a blessing for generations to come. But a tree without fruit—how sad is that! We might think it has no value at all. But Jesus doesn't see it that way. Jesus invites us to recognize the grace and mercy and goodness that God gives, the second chances God gives for every underperforming fruit tree. We have this day, this beautiful day, to act with love.

Kate Bowler tells about struggling with so much fear: fear about the cancer and the future and all she couldn't control; fear about leaving her husband to raise their son alone; fear that her son would be too young to remember her if she were to die soon. And she tells about how important it was to receive the love and wisdom of friends who didn't try to fix her fear with false reassurances, and who helped her live in the present. Their love helped her see that her life was both deeply painful and deeply beautiful, so she could treasure whatever time she had with her family and friends.

What Kate has, what the fig tree has, and what we have, is the present, surrounded and upheld by God's grace. And in this present we can give our hearts and hands to act with love, with compassion, with generosity and forgiveness. Even though there's a war going on in Ukraine that makes it feel like the whole world is in danger, God gives us this day to invest in love in some way. Even though homelessness and gun violence and drug overdoses in Portland make it feel like this danger is right at our door, God still gives us this day to act with love. If we are looking for where God is at work in the world, I think Jesus would discourage us from trying to discern God's hand in global conflicts or local tragedies. Instead, God is present wherever love reaches out to a neighbor in need or pain. God is present wherever God's people are devoted to Jesus' way of compassion and forgiveness. And that is what makes all the difference. Thanks be to God. Amen.