

Life is Priceless. Make the Most of It!

Lessons: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-

What kinds of questions do you have when you hear this lesson?

Pilate massacres innocent people? What “Galileans” and why is Jesus talking about people who were Gentiles and pagans to a Jewish audience?

A tower falls on innocent people. What happened? A collapse from shoddy construction? An earthquake tremor? More innocent people dying, but this time Jews in Jerusalem of all places.

Does the scripture lesson open up questions you ask from time to time when you hear about events like this?

Innocent people who get killed by some evil person or by their own evil is something we can explain, but why do innocent people die by accident or terrible disease or like some people say, because “It was God’s will”?

Is Jesus asking what we would ask? “Why do innocent people die? Why can’t God protect them, and at least kill or punish the really evil people who do the murdering? And why do people have to die in natural disasters like earthquakes in Haiti and now Chile? or Katrina and Rita and the regular wave of disasters that are circling the globe somewhere most every night and day?

The people listening to Jesus that day were asking a different question: “Were these people any worse than others?” Did they die because they deserved to die? Were they being punished by God like a very public and very misinformed preacher said recently about God punishing Haiti for all their sins?

Jesus’ answer to our question and their question is “NO., but unless you repent, you will all perish just like they did.”

Before we go any further here, we need to get inside Jesus’ thinking to help our confusion and questions. A lot of people never get past the question of “If God is love, why do innocent people suffer or die (and not-so-innocent people seem to do just fine, thank you)?”

I’ve asked myself that question more times than not. Haven’t you? We have this God-given need for justice that is offended when we see injustice. We know it is our job to protect the innocent? Why doesn’t God? Pilate massacres people. Earthquakes tumble buildings. Why?

Well, those are questions we ask, but Jesus says focusing on them freezes us from taking care of more important questions. We let the things we have no control over turn our attention away from the things we can do something about.

We will find different answers if we change our questions?

Jesus is saying we need to “repent.” We hear that word from the history of revival meetings and hell-fire preachers. But Jesus is NOT talking about heaven and hell. He is saying, “you need to turn around. Stop asking about why people die and start doing something about how people

live!” We all wind up in the same place sooner or later, and God’s world won’t be any better off unless we do something for God while we can.

Jesus is saying, “Life is priceless. Do something with it, while you have the chance.”

“Repenting” means that we focus less on the evil that others do or the good that they don’t do, and look closely at our lives to confess the times we have done things that we cannot imagine Jesus doing, and confess the times that we have we had a chance to do something good for God and decided to do something more important for ourselves.

Living faithful means that we define goodness by what we do that pleases God and makes the world better instead of saying we are good because we stay away from people or places or things that are bad, and we don’t wind up being killed like the people that are worse sinners than we are.

Trusting God means that we spend less time worrying about what God is doing, and more time thinking about what we need to be doing that Christ wants us to do – and getting on with it.

Let’s think of an example in our own living to help us understand how we may need to turn away from the way we see what is happening around us, and try to see our lives the way that Christ might see them.

Look at our lives: Let’s say that we all live really busy lives, and we are so busy with them that we don’t even have time to stop and think why we are so busy. Time is so precious, and there seems to be so little of it. Between the have to’s and the need to’s, there is no time for the want to’s. It’s not like we are doing bad things, really sinful and evil things. We are doing good things, but there are too many good things to do. We take on another “yes” and don’t have time to take care of the “yes” we said last week. There are just too many good things to do.

Look at the church – and I mean churches everywhere: We are having to do more and more with less and less. There are fewer people doing more work, there is less money and more need. People are so busy. There are always other people at the church who are not that busy and can do the task or be at the event or even be at worship on Sunday when something comes up that I need to be doing and can’t make it this week. Three hours *every* week is asking a lot these days. And time to help out at the church on top of Sunday means that 20% of the people are doing 90% of the doing.

Look at our choices: Let’s say that if we looked at how we actually spend our time, we might be able to “just say ‘no’” to some of the things we do that – well, we can say this in a sanctuary – some things we do that Jesus would tell us are a waste of time. I don’t mean something as important as watching a basketball game with a really good ending. But March is here, and maybe a few of us are going to spend almost as much time watching basketball in March as we do going to football games in the fall.

Diversions are good. They give us some relief from all the trouble in the world, and the pressure of our lives and the evil we see on TV. The trouble is that with all the diversions, we don’t have much time left in life for the ... doing some good.

Let’s be honest. Most all of us are too busy because “want to’s” more than “have to’s”. We get them confused, don’t we.

We are busy working and raising children, and for some reason our children are over-involved because we are teaching them how not to say “no” by example. We worry about how much our children and youth stare at a computer screen, but we don’t add up how many hours a week we watch television.

Or we are retired, and still working or taking care of families who need us, or trying to get in to see a doctor who is too busy to see us. But we say we are “busier than ever” without looking at doing less in some places so that we can open up some time for more important things.

Where can we get some help to point us in a different direction, to turn us around, so to speak. To help us “repent” before perish in the frantic pace?

Like Jesus says, “Life is priceless. Make the most of it while you can.” Make the most of it NOT by doing everything you can. Make the most of it for Christ’s sake each day, while you can. Christ is always with you. Ask yourself if Christ wants to be where you are throughout the day. Each day will be better at the end of the day when you ask the right questions through the day.

Sharon is a probate judge in her town, and her husband is an attorney, too. They are busy people. She is a 5th generation member of her Presbyterian congregation. She has 3 children, all as priceless as any child. The oldest was profoundly disabled from birth, unable to go to school in any conventional sense. But she was “mainstreamed” at church, there every Sunday sitting next to her mother in the choir. When parents would come to me as a pastor apologizing for not being at church and asking how to manage jobs and children and the panic of too much to do, I would tell them to go talk to Sharon. She always had time sit down with them.

Forrest Dunham was a member of the first Presbyterian church I served. He was a retired executive at Southwestern Bell. His wife was homebound. Getting her to one of her doctors was an all-day enterprise that happened most every week. But every Friday, Forrest made sure they took a drive to see some pretty place. He called it their “sabbath drive.” Forrest was Clerk of session at the church. And several mornings a week about 10:30 he would drop by the church after he had made his “run” to pick up the day-old bread for the neighborhood food pantry. Sometimes Forrest would tell me, “Well, I’m ahead of schedule. I’ve done two good things for God already this morning.”

These people are unofficial saints, but they are far from perfect. They are just ordinary people like you and me who worked at saying “yes” to some things and “no” to other things until being faithful became a habit and trusting God with the rest of it made them breath easier.

Presbyterians – when we are at our best – don’t spend a lot of time pointing the finger at other people’s evil. We don’t waste time questioning God’s wisdom, deciding what God should do about what we think is important. We don’t “go negative” worrying about what’s wrong with whatever out there that is the reason the world is in such bad shape.

Presbyterians – when we are at our best – spend our time looking at our own lives and turning away from our own sin and evil. We let God take care of the big picture, and we focus on the task that God puts in front of us to make the world God’s place and let people know we and God love them. We see, and we celebrate the ways that God is at work all around us where a lot of good is being done everyday by all kinds of people all around the world – and right here in Brenham in plain view.

Jesus gives an illustration to help us see what he means about turning from the things that turn us away from God is doing, and paying attention to the things that make all the difference around us for Christ's sake.

A man had a fruit tree in his yard that was fruitless year after year. So he told the gardener to cut it down. But the gardener said that all it needed was some attention, and he could change his schedule and spend more time and attention cultivating it. Give it another year.

A lot of us feel like trees short on nourishment and not producing much. But the gardener turns to us and gives us some needed attention, watches us carefully and digs at our foundations and prunes our lifeless branches. He becomes our savior, and he is pleased when we start producing fruit.

Life is priceless. Let's make the most of it for Christ, while we can. Let's do something good for God every day, and celebrate what others are doing. Let's spend less time wasting time, and more time putting our energies in places where God can make a difference through us.

Let's give our heart and minds, our souls and strength to serve the one who paid the greatest price to give us the different life that we could never buy for ourselves. Life – real life living with Christ – is priceless. Let's band together and vow to each other that as Christ's flesh and blood in Brenham, we will make the most of it for Christ's sake.