

## Disturbia

Today's gospel lesson reads much like the front page headlines of a newspaper. "Bloodthirsty politician sends soldiers to temple to slaughter pious Galileans." "Toppled tower in Jerusalem kills eighteen: city maintenance department found negligent."

Like in Jesus' day, we find ourselves bombarded with horrible news and tragedy after tragedy which leave us numb and despairing and feeling helpless, if we still feel anything at all.

This is a space in our minds known as "disturbia," to borrow the title of a hit song recorded in 2008 by R&B singer Rihanna. During a 2008 interview on the British show *This Morning*, Rihanna explained that her song is an attempt to express the deep state of craziness which we are all trying to cope with in this day and age. Apparently she has struck a deep chord with the millions who have listened to her music.

Even if Rihanna isn't your favorite artist—and let me be the first to say that I am not lifting up her personal life as an example for us all to try to emulate, as it is full to the brim with disturbia—she does speak clearly to the universal experience of feeling like we are just barely hanging on.

Some of us thought we were escaping disturbia by moving to suburbia, but as many of us have discovered, suburbia has its own kind of craziness. It is a well known fact that domestic violence is the number one police call in Medina.

Alcoholism and drug abuse are very high—everywhere. The AA and Al-Anon meetings which meet here every week at St. Thomas are second only to Sunday worship services in terms of attendance.

Just the other day I was visiting a local Eastside high school and had a rude awakening when I noticed that the entrance to the campus was patrolled by a uniformed and armed police officer.

I reached my own disturbia breaking point when I recently witnessed our daughter Rachel finally putting all of the pieces together and discovering, to her horror, that the human race has enough nuclear bombs to blow our planet out of the solar system. If disturbia is a form of craziness characterized by a terrifying state of “anguish, anxiety, and confusion” in which there is no human cure, then I will be the first to admit that I have a good dose of it.

In Jesus’ day, it appears that many coped with disturbia by believing that terrifying things happen to folks because they did something sinful, provoking God’s judgment. Oddly, it is comforting to some to believe that all suffering is the direct result of sin. A crime-and-punishment model creates some sort of order out of a chaotic world and thereby eliminates the randomness of disasters.

According to this way of thinking, bad things happen to bad people and good things happen to good people. Or another variation of the tenet: I am not as bad as that person, and so I am safe for now, because the more sinful will certainly get his or her punishment before I do. This is based on the assumption that there are billions of folks on this planet and God has a long list to go down before he reaches you. Now that is disturbia!

I have to say I had to dig down deeper into today’s gospel lesson than normal to find the Good News. The first response that Jesus made to those curious about the Galilean tragedy and the Siloam Tower casualties clarified that the victims were not worse sinners than all the rest. But those are hardly comforting words. In fact, Jesus challenges their complacency and, in fact, injects them with a little holy disturbia by warning them that they will perish as the others did if they do not repent.

Repentance is a central theme of the Gospel of Luke and the season of Lent. Christendom appears to be divided in its understanding of what it is and how God utilizes it in the process of conversion.

From a study of today’s Gospel it is clear that the call to renounce and turn away from our sins contains the threat of divine retribution *and* the promise of forgiveness. It is the promise of forgiveness and grace which I believe is ultimately the cure for disturbia and that is

what I would like to turn our attention to. Jesus' wakeup call is duly noted.

In the parable of the barren fig tree, which is the second part of today's gospel lesson, Jesus helps us uncover God's deepest desire and plan for our salvation. The owner of a vineyard complains to the gardener that the fig tree has not been producing fruit for three whole years and that it should be cut down.

Thank goodness the gardener is motivated more by the heart than the pocketbook! Presumably it is the gardener who has cared for the tree all this time—watered it, fertilized it, watched it grow—he has formed a relationship and investment and he does not want to lose all he has labored for. The vineyard owner has become like an overanxious parent infected with a suburban brand of disturbia and is now pressing in to see the report card.

By contrast, the gardener is like the unanxious parent who patiently keeps tending to the needs of his or her child, focusing on growth rather than grades and test scores. It is important to note that the gardener is not passive, leaving the fig tree's welfare to chance. The gardener loosens the soil to ensure that water finds the roots and spreads manure around the base of the tree as fertilizer.

There is little doubt in my mind that Jesus was using what comedians call "insult humor" to get his point across. It is likely that the disturbia Jesus was attempting to address was one of the major disturbias of his day: pharisaism. If the unproductive fig tree represents scribes, chief priests, and Pharisees, which is one way to interpret the story, then the whole idea of dumping manure on and around them was either humorous or disturbing, depending on your point of view.

Interestingly, the parable ends without letting us know for certain whether the vineyard owner accepts the gardener's offer, but Jesus leaves us with the hope that he does. The gospel says God waited three years for the fig tree to grow fruit. The Good News is that God keeps granting us extensions.

These extensions, however, are not parent permission slips designed to feed procrastination and lukewarm discipleship. God's extensions give the Holy Spirit more time to cultivate and fertilize our nutrient-

starved souls through prayer, study of his Word, service, and the ongoing invitation to feed at his Holy Table.

The Good News is that God never gives up on us! Lent is our wake-up call to the ongoing conversion of the Christian life. It reveals to us that if we wish to bear fruit, we must die to ourselves and our distubia and continue to prepare for the new life made possible through our faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.