

I've always been a news watcher. I know all of the naysaying there is out there about media channels being biased and all but, for me, watching the news has helped me feel a little more connected to my world. I would be lying though if I said that there haven't been times when I have turned the TV off because the news of our world just seems like too much to carry. In our news just in the past couple of weeks there have been stories of mass shootings in New Zealand and Holland; divisive politics; unfortunate, freak weather; war in Syria and elsewhere – and that's not even getting into our own troubles in New Hampshire.

This is our world – full of heartbreak, grief, brokenness, suffering, oppression, tears, hatred, pain. We are literally bombarded with the brokenness of our world. Our access to 24 hour news channels, the internet, social media, or radio allows the hurt, the violence, the noise of our brokenness to permeate into our daily lives. Yet, somehow, it is incredibly easy to tune this noise out. It is incredibly easy to forget the calamities that saturate our world. Somehow, I can pretty routinely gaze upon the news every night and not be absolutely horrified. Why is that? Why does it take a calamity so large that I can *not* ignore it for me to lament, “Christ have mercy!”?

I wonder if this overloading of reality has caused us to be numb. News story after news story of painful brokenness – perhaps we protect ourselves by tuning out. Acknowledging the hurt of another human being causes us to see the suffering of our own humanity, thinking about the ways in which we too are broken – and that is painful. It's much easier to block out the realities of our world than to acknowledge the hurt that is so palpably present.

In the gospel for today, the people surrounding Jesus are aware of the painful happenings of their world – murders by political figures, security threats, disastrous accidents that kill innocent bystanders – yet they, too, do all that they can to acknowledge their own safety, assuring themselves that the brokenness of the world does not pertain to their own existence. They distance themselves from the events, from their own reality, finding clever ways to explain away their own vulnerability. They want to believe that all of the suffering in their world was a reflection of God's wrath upon sinners, a fate that was meant for others and not themselves.

After hearing their musings, Jesus firmly reconnects these people to the reality of their world. While the people gathered wanted to distance themselves from those who suffered in the events of their time, Jesus points out their own vulnerability. The people gathered wanted to believe that the horrific events of that time happened to horrific people – surely those who perished must have done something to deserve it and that the complacency of those gathered is warranted.

To this type of thinking – distancing, desensitizing, individualizing – Jesus responds: “Repent!” To distance oneself from the world’s brokenness is to ignore the raw humanness that connects us all. To desensitize oneself to the pain and hurt of our reality is to ignore the ways in which we all hurt. And to want to believe that the oppression in our world does not pertain to us, or to our own realities, is to ignore the fact that we can indeed do something about it – and it is to this that Jesus says “Repent!”

The word, “repent,” as we reflected upon a couple weeks ago, is one that has been studied over and over again by scholars and theologians. We have heard it described as a call to turn away in other stories but the version of the verb used in this story is a bit different. Here the call to repentance could also be a call to feel remorse, or to change the way we think morally, emotionally – how we interact interpersonally. This feeling of remorse in connection to our relationships in the world is *empathy*. So, what if, in this text, we saw Jesus’ call for repentance as a call for empathy. When we empathize with another we connect ourselves to their story on a much deeper level. When we allow ourselves to feel the emotions of another human being we open ourselves up to a world that is interconnected and mutual. When we truly understand the hurt and pain of another it is then that we are able to begin changing the systems that lead to that same hurt.

Ten years ago, I had the privilege of traveling to Angola to work with the Anglican Church there. We did a lot of studying in order to prepare for our time in Angola. We learned in painful detail about the suffering, oppression, and deep pain of the Angolan people during the civil war they endured for 27 years before it finally ended in 2002. I remember vividly how we felt as Susan Lassen, a member of St. John’s here in Portsmouth who had been there several times, described the horrors we likely would see vestiges of on our trip. And sure enough, when we went, I saw them. Rusting tanks by the roadside. “Peligro! Minas!” signs (“Danger! Mines!”) in odd, curious places. I remember sitting in the living room of one of the people who were preparing for the trip

and just crying for the people of Angola. We cried for the people who lost loved ones unjustly, we cried for the people who witnessed the violent massacre of their neighbors, we cried for the people we would meet whose memories will not let them forget the horrors of civil war.

We were not ready to travel to Angola, to walk alongside our brothers and sisters there, until we opened ourselves to feeling their hurt. This process was uncomfortable – it hurt to acknowledge the pain that God’s children can inflict on one another and it was painful to gaze upon the messy chaos of our world – but in doing so we were better able to connect with those we met in Angola, and while we were there, sharing stories and meals, we were able to get a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

Sometimes it’s easier to turn off the news than to acknowledge that the world we live in is messy. It is difficult to do the hard work of understanding systems of oppression and it’s uncomfortable to sit in the suffering of another. But we are not called to complacency. We are called to be disciples – voices against oppression, agents for justice. We are called to be a part of the good news that is the gospel – believing and standing firm in faith that a world *can* exist where all of God’s children can live in peace, and where justice and love can be given a chance to prevail.

And if you think that this task at times seems too daunting, know that your God will walk with you always. This is why it is so important that Luke adds the parable of the fig tree to this story. As we hear this daunting and intimidating task we are reminded of God’s mercy through Christ. We cannot bear fruit by ourselves. We cannot make these changes on our own. On our behalf, we have an advocate who gently prunes our prickles, and tends to our soil, leading us in the way of compassion. Like the story of the fig tree that just can’t seem to bear fruit, God will continue to encourage us, give us second chances – God will never stop believing for God’s people. Take heart. We are in this together.