

When Things Go Wrong
Luke 13:1-9, February 28, 2015

Last Sunday evening, we hosted the U-Talks event. There were about 100 people in attendance. The 42nd Moderator of the United Church, The Right Rev. Jordan Cantwell shared her experience in China. She was very energetic. She answered questions about the future of churches both here and in China. She gave very inspiring ideas. I would like to thank a lot of brothers and sisters, especially when they came to help out the refreshments time. We had a smooth evening, thank you very much.

Today's Scripture comes from Luke Chapter 13. This is a flammable message. I believe this kind of message is not foreign to us, but it can have an explosive effect. This passage needs a label like “flammable” as a marker, so we can be careful and know it should not be mishandled. These types of alarming passages, even threatening ones, often appear in the Bible. We should handle it with care, including clergy. We who follow Jesus should not only see what words we find in the Bible, but also consider its meaning with appropriate theological thoughts of the time.

Today's gospel passage, if we did not feel any difficulty from it, it is probably because we grew up with this kind of teaching. A lot of Asian cultures like to use negativity as a way to encourage people to do good. Through intimidation and negative talk, we hope people will choose the right path and do the right things.

When I was young, we often heard parents say, “Do you want to become a beggar? If you don't study well, you will become a beggar.” It is just an example encourage us to behave. But it all begins with negative statements, with the hope that people will do good. This is no longer the way we teach today, the negative psychological impact later in life cannot be ignored.

These stories, like today's scripture, they are like glass that should be handled with care. The mentioning of sin, repentance and death, can be used to intimidate others. However, if handled carefully, they can be a pathway of love and encouragement. In particular, when we read the Bible, individual verses and chapters cannot be dealt with separately. We need to pay attention to the gospel writers, in this case, Luke, and how he described things and how the story developed. We may want to

pay attention to the previous chapter, Chapter 12, when Jesus mentioned an ignorant rich man as a way to teach us not to worry about life, but to accumulate wealth in heaven. At the end of Chapter 12, Jesus pointed out that some people have the ability to forecast weather, but cannot tell what time it is. These series of talk that have led to Chapter 13.

The mentioning of Pilate killing some Galileans in Jerusalem, has not appeared in other parts of the Bible. We cannot find any historical reference about this incident. About exactly what happened, we can't be certain. In Jesus' time, not every event was recorded. Jesus seems to know that event, knows what they are talking about. He asked, these tragedies happened was it because of their sins. Jesus said: Of course not. But Jesus seized the opportunity, saying that if people don't repent, they will perish like they are. This is puzzling to me.

First, the relationship between tragedy and sin has been discussed a million times in the Christian circle. In other parts of the Bible, Jesus also told us that for children who were born blind, it has nothing to do with their parents' sin. Of course not. It seems so clear, yet whenever we encounter difficult circumstances, some people cannot help but to think, "It must be that I have done something wrong, so now God is punishing me." Also through the teaching of Jesus, Christians sometime mistakenly believe that all the Jews in Jesus' time believe tragedies are punishments from God, so we needed Jesus clarify. But things are not so. In Jesus' time, the people were divided on this issue. Today, we understand that some suffering is the result of sin. We made poor decisions, and we are responsible. But there are times where sin has totally nothing to do with it.

What is puzzling is when Jesus says, "If they do not repent, they will perish like those people." The people Jesus talks about are those Galileans who were killed by Pilate. But we remember earlier that Jesus was certainly against the idea that Galilee were killed has nothing do with sin. What does Jesus mean when he said, if people don't repent, they will also perish like them? It is not clear what Jesus means. Was Jesus saying unrepentant people will be been killed by lightning, earthquake? This is uncertain. So I would like to point out that we do not fully know what Jesus said, its meaning is very vague. Nonetheless, we often accept words like these and form a picture of God as untouchable, stern and judgmental.

Jesus uses a parable of the fig tree. It gives us new light. Jesus saw a fig tree that did not bear fruit, and he told the servants to cut it down. But the caretaker of the

garden said, "Give it a chance. He would do some nurturing work. If it still doesn't bear fruit, and then cut it down later."

This metaphor gives us a different attitude, it is full of grace. Just like the parable of the prodigal son, where we saw how God treats rigid minds. He is like a father waiting for his son to return home daily. Another helpful analogy, God is like a woman who searched endlessly for a lost silver coin. These stories provide us with additional words to imagine how God deal with the us. In this parable of the fig tree, we usually believe the request to cut down the fig tree is God. In fact, it does us no harm to imagine the one who begged to have the tree saved, will nurture it, is God.

Today's Scripture does not solve our most difficult problem of life: why do bad things happen to good people? Why don't good people get rewarded and why is it that bad people don't get the proper justice they deserve? No, Jesus did not answer this question. But while not having an answer, we cannot give up living a life of love, and to live with integrity. There are many difficult questions in life that we cannot find the answer to.

There are political situations that appear to be ridiculous, a bit like watching some American presidential candidates give racial comments and rhetoric. In a chaotic generation, people worry when and whether the next dictator will come. In Jesus' time, people were also living in such absurdity. Jesus seems to say to us: Don't let headline news dictate how we live our lives. We learn to be wise, to know that God is the one who cultivate our lives, God cares and nurtures us so that we may bear fruits. God will not have us cut down, just hope we have the opportunity to grow.

Some biblical passages are flammable like the one we have today. But the Bible also contains enough encouragement for us to trust and follow this God with grace.

Repentance actually means turning around, meaning a change of heart. Jesus is our leader. He teaches us to live a different way of life and to show the world God's love. Even when the world seems ridiculous, God shows us how not to be discouraged. When we experience crises, may God give us mercy to live out the message of Jesus.