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## Waste Management

### Luke 9: 28-43a

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 3, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke Powery

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If you live long enough, you'll realize that bad things happen to good people all the time. But when bad things happen to those deemed to be bad people, what do you think? How do you respond to "the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" or "those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them"? Would we find rejoicing if we watched the media coverage of your heart? Did they deserve to suffer because of their sin? Was God paying them back for years of wrongdoing, for not being holy and righteous, for not being a saved-sanctified-Holy Ghost-filled-fire-baptized-Jesus-on-my-mind type of Christian? Physical suffering was widely viewed as a consequence of sin in the ancient world (Lk 5:18-24; Deut 28-30; Ezek 18:26-27, Jn 9:2-3) and many today have bought into this thinking. In the book of John, we hear the disciples ask Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (9:2) Suffering, whether from an act of human evil or natural disasters, was correlated with the sin of that individual or community or family. It was a rational attempt to make sense of why bad things happen to people and how evil can occur when God is supposed to be good. This is the problem of theodicy. This perspective on the marriage of suffering and sin is even a way to perhaps affirm that some people deserve their suffering and pain—"it's their fault." It even suggests that some people may be disposable in our eyes despite their humanity because we think their lives are a waste.

We so badly want to hold to the idea that good people are prosperous and healthy and evil ones are poor and sick. That loss or lack of success is a sign of divine punishment or that one's financial, social, and physical state are directly linked to one's spiritual state. But this is not true because God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust (Matt 5:45), on Duke and UNC. You can't just name a blessing and claim it and get it from God as the proponents of the prosperity gospel want us to believe. God is not a divine Jeannie waiting to grant our every wish. The Galileans who suffered were not worse sinners than all other Galileans. The eighteen killed by the tower of Siloam were not worse offenders than all others in Jerusalem. The tragedy and agony they endured were not due to their sin or a lack of faith or not confessing the scriptures properly or not saying their daily Lenten prayers. Suffering stalks all of us like the paparazzi and evil sometimes prospers and the righteous suffer. No one is immune from the cancerous sore of suffering, and as New Testament scholar and homiletician Fred Craddock reminds us, "Life in the kingdom is not an elevated game of gaining favors and avoiding losses."

The mention of blood and Pilate in this passage reminds me of how Pilate even has the blood of innocent Jesus on his hands whose crucified suffering comes as a result of following the will and kingdom of God. Jesus did not sin but he still suffered. The 9/11 World Trade Center Towers. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The 2005 Hurricane Katrina. The 2010 Haiti earthquake. The 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting. Yet, there are those who will say these horrific things happened because 'they made a deal with the devil' or 'God is paying America back for its sins.' That would mean God condones massacres of innocents.

These are silly statements of judgment that present others as worse than ourselves, as if we were saints, and everybody else, sinners. But Jesus turns our pointing wagging finger of judgment toward us and reminds us that there is no hierarchy of sin. We are no better off than others because we too must repent. "What I condemn in others may be but a reflection of myself in a mirror." One writer tells a story of how one summer he shared a suite with two other men on an university campus. He writes, "The suite consisted of two bedrooms, a bath and a living room. The two men occupied one of the bedrooms and I, the other. One night when I came in, as I opened the door, I heard a voice say, 'Pipe down, for Pete's sake, pipe down.' This was followed by the soft thud of a pillow being thrown against the wall. In a few minutes one of the fellows stood at the door with disheveled hair and distraught features. 'I can't go to sleep. Have you ever heard such snoring? Usually I get off first and then his snoring does not disturb me but tonight he went to bed early. There ought to be a law against it. Why doesn't his wife tell him, or maybe she is a snorer herself'.... I replied that there was an extra bed in my

room, which he could share if my reading lamp would not keep him awake. He accepted gladly, assuring me that the light would not disturb him. After he had retired and I had settled down for an hour's reading, I became aware of his heavy breathing. Then it began—the most pronounced and heavy snoring that I had ever heard in my life. Finally, I could not continue my reading and I knew that sleep would be impossible. I went into the living room, where I spent the night on the couch.... When he saw me [in the morning] he said, 'Oh no! Don't tell me. I'll never blow my top again about snorers.' The only creative attitude toward the weaknesses or the disabilities of others is a quiet humility" (Howard Thurman). As the 1 Corinthians lectionary reading for today says, "So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone" (1 Cor 10). In other words, there are no Olympic champion sinner winners. Sin is sin. It is the spiritual equalizer.

And all suffer because manure happens. I don't normally think of manure when I preach, though some sermons I've heard have been like a pile of it. I blame Jesus for this reference today. He names it in his parable about the fig tree. He knows that we think manure is disposable, a waste, but he also knows that God runs a waste management program. There is a call to repentance but there is also this parable of divine patience. The vineyard owner tells the gardener that he wants to cut down the fig tree because it hasn't been bearing any fruit. "Why should it be wasting the soil?" What a waste of time. What a waste of energy. What a waste of money. What a waste of space. What a waste of talent. What a waste of a life. Cut it down. It's not worth anything anyway. It's disposable—a waste. We won't miss it if its massacred or toppled by a crumbling tower. They were a waste, a sinner, anyway. But the gracious gardener responds, "let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it." Give it one more year. One more chance. One more opportunity.

Nothing or no one is a waste when God is involved. There is a wideness and depth to God's mercy. As deep as a mound of manure. Nothing, not even an animal's excrement, is out of the reach and bounds of God's holistic redemptive purposes. We may see others as wasting soil or wasting space on earth because we don't see any fruit, but God chooses to manage waste, to reuse that which others may have discarded. Waste is valuable and not a waste of time to God. Waste can do magic like manure. Manure is an organic fertilizer in agriculture and contributes to the flourishing of the soil by adding nutrients to it. You can't judge a book by its cover. Who would have thought that salvation could come from such a smell? Waste has good purposes when God is gardening. The breadth of God's love provides a wide, gracious space and an opportunity for one to thrive, to bear fruit. "One more year." God does not give up on us. "One more year." Your life may be viewed as a pile of cow mess but God gets God's hands in messy manure and declares "one more year." God's mercy meets God's judgment in this passage and chants with the Cameron crazies—"one more year. One more year."

It's never too late for redemption. There was "a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." When people saw her they thought "what a waste." But "when Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God" (Luke 13:10ff). "One more year." It's never too late to be straightened out and up, healed and delivered by the hand of Christ. Your life is not a waste nor wasting away because no human life is a waste to God. And God can use whatever is considered to be waste. You are not disposable no matter what society may say.

One of my oldest cousins has always looked up to me because she could never walk nor talk; her gaze always came from below. Her legs are twisted at the kneecaps so if she does move it is more like a crawl. She, we may say, is differently-abled. Many in society may look at her and believe that she is disposable, a waste. But my aunt, her mother, who birthed her into the world, always said, "one more year" even as others may have chanted "cut it down!" She baptized my cousin every time she gave her a warm bath. She served her communion every time she fed her a piece of bread. She clothed her in love every time she dressed her and combed her hair. She affirmed the humanity of my cousin and revealed to her that her life was not a waste, despite the suffering she endured. She was not disposable as my aunt sustained her for "one more year."

Galileans. Jerusalemites. A crippled woman. An older cousin. A child who is differently-abled. A senior citizen in hospice. The poor. Orphans. Widows. Prisoners. No one is a waste, out of the reach of God's redemption. This is God's waste management plan—God will save that which others throw away. What we think of as

waste may actual be the means of salvation for us—those people, that place, that thing, that waste like manure. Manure has never looked or smelled better than right now.

To those listening to the sound of my voice on the radio or television or YouTube, to the vast wastelands of America—you can't quit now. As we sang, "For the love of God is broader than the measure of our mind." When someone sees you, they may see waste. But when God sees you, God sees worth and says, "one more year." You may be struggling through life's weary wilderness, but God says, "one more year." Tears may be your food day and night, but God says, "one more year." All of your hard efforts may never seem to bear fruit, but God says, "one more year." You may feel like you're always climbing up the rough side of the mountain, but God says, "one more year." You may endure a fiery crucible of unexplainable suffering, but God says, "one more year." You may be thinking that life is not worth living anymore, but God says, "one more year." "One more year."