

Luke 13:1-9

Can I risk saying that all of us in worship today have either heard of or played the game "Musical Chairs"? Along with "Pin-the-Tail-on-the-Donkey" "Musical Chairs" is the ultimate party game. You have a group of people, arrange the chairs in a circle so that each chair (you know-the sitting part!) is facing out and then participants walk around the chair circle while the music plays. It is really fun. Well it is fun until the music stops. That is when players run to sit down in a chair. That is, everyone except for one player, because there is exactly one fewer chair according to the number of players. The person without the chair to sit on is "out". No longer able to play the game, but the larger majority is allowed to keep going when the music starts up again. And they walk the circle, with music playing, with one fewer chair available when the music stops again.

The game of "Musical Chairs" is like the first part of our gospel lesson from Luke. Except that what is going on in the text is no game for the people. When children play "Musical Chairs" and a player is called "out". The majority of them believe the reason to be that the child was not fast enough. Or the child was lazy, or not strong enough to muscle their way into a chair.

The people coming to Jesus are also implying something about others. They are implying that the Galileans who were killed by Pilate while making sacrifices to God must have had evil hearts. Maybe they were coming to God in the wrong way. Why else would God allow them to die? Maybe they believe their sacrifices were impure? Therefore God would allow them to be murdered. Like players scrambling and fighting for chairs in the game they want to explain the reason why others are out. These Galileans must have been lazy, slow, fake, or weak. Sinners of the worst kind!

Jesus tells them, "No. Absolutely not." These Galileans are no worse a sinner than all the other Galileans. Then before they can talk Jesus goes on to those confronting him. He says, "Before you begin to even think it, the 18 that were killed in the building accident at the Temple tower are the same as the other offenders living in Jerusalem. So don't even try to find reasons for the tragedy. Don't even think that they died because they sinned in greater measure than you. You all must repent!" Tragedy strikes the good and the evil.

"Musical Chairs" plays this out as a beautiful metaphor. Everyone is "in" at the beginning of the game, and along the journey a few "depart". In the middle of the game half are "in". Then at the end only two players are left and they look down at one chair. We can even be tempted to ask, "Who will be the greater failure between these two? Who will not be strong enough to win the last chair?" This part of the game can be quite humorous as either player does not want to be on the back side of the chair when the music stops. Unless you are like the youth I witnessed once playing this game. When the music stopped he was on the back side of the winning seat. So when his opponent went to sit down, he pulled the chair out from behind her. She crashed to the carpeted floor and out of the game.

I have to admit when I found out the young girl was not hurt I laughed also. For us the game was over, but Jesus in the lesson is telling his listeners that the music is going to continue to play. Jesus points to the inevitability of death. Kind of like the winner of "Musical Chairs" continuing to walk around waiting for the music to stop and seeing he has no chair to sit on and still the music will stop. One day the music will stop for us too.

I was in a conversation recently with a member here and we were talking about hospital visits. This person asked if it was extremely difficult to minister to a person who knows that he/she is going to die. I thought to myself, we should all know that we are going to die, but I understood what was being asked. The truth is that it is not easy to know what to say when someone tells you they are terminally ill. But the part that is extremely difficult is when the person goes on to say they believe they are dying because of punishment from God. This is one of the most sorrowful statements to hear because the person does not know the depth of God's love. No one has told them or they have been taught improperly. Jesus addresses this human rationale for explaining tragedy. He answers with a resounding, "No Way."

Jesus then backs up, elucidates, his claim by using a four verse parable. Parables are short stories that are never sweet. They are messy and dangerous and most often used by Jesus to teach about God's kingdom to believers.

The fig tree is not producing figs. The owner calls the tree a failure and orders the gardener to cut it down. Let's assign people to the parable characters. You might see yourself as the fig tree, upset about your past or current failures. Or you might see the barren fig tree as a person in poverty, draining resources of the public in order to put food on the table. Perhaps the barren fig tree is an abused child, a third world country, Haiti? You get the point. Fill in who is not producing fruit and you have the fig tree. The gardener is Jesus Christ. The gardener stands in front of the fig tree and announces grace and the opportunity of forgiveness. Give the tree one more years' chance. The gardener will tend to the tree, make it healthy again. Jesus Christ is not interested in why the fig tree does not produce, but that Christ will care for and stand for the tree. Christ also stands for you, the grieving person, the abused child, and the third world country. Finally, and most importantly the gardener places trust in letting things unfold naturally. There is grace time but also a warning. But do not presume you have an unlimited amount of time. Jesus urges his listeners to repent NOW! The Gardener gives the gift of mercy and Christ will not cut humanity down. The question is who will? Who will cut humanity down? The Vineyard owner, but who is the vineyard owner? The vineyard owner cannot be God because Christ is God and thus the gardener, the intervener.

Maybe the vineyard owner is the corporate tycoon who gobbles up small businesses, fires employees and gauges customers. Or, maybe the vineyard owner is the nation that closes its borders to immigrants seeking safety. Perhaps the vineyard owner is a corporate farm that forces small farmers to sell their land, or banks that charge exorbitant amounts of interest when a consumer misses one payment. Or maybe...just maybe...the vineyard owner is the one that pulls the chair away from the other and sits down to win, and then it just might be me-the one who laughed.

Let us pray. O Lord, hear our words of repentance, thank you for the grace you have given us. Amen.

Copyright © 2010, Thomas Holdcraft. All rights reserved.