

*A sermon given on Sunday, March 7, 2010,  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***What We Deserve***

A couple of decades ago I was still in my first year of parish ministry when I paid a hospital call on a curmudgeonly member of the church – I'll call him Frank. In the course of the visit our conversation turned to the accidental death that week of a high school boy, a local football star who foolishly tried experimenting with explosives in his garage, and had blown himself up. "Serves him right," said Frank. "If you're too stupid to build a pipe bomb you'd just darn well better not try." Frank's candid assessment: by virtue of his stupidity, the boy deserved to die.

Last week in a dinner conversation each person at the table related some stupid thing we had done in our youth. My story was this. When I was twelve or thirteen I was rummaging in the garage and happened upon one of those Coleman camping lanterns. I decided to see whether it worked. I couldn't find any lantern fuel. What I did find was the can of gasoline for the lawn mower. I figured it would do just as well. I filled the lantern, pumped up the pressurizing primer, and lit the mantle. It glowed white. I carried it around for a while. Then I got bored, and put it out. That the gasoline bomb I had created did not explode and kill me or mutilate me for life is somewhere in the realm of miracle or sheer dumb luck. If, as the curmudgeon Frank suggested, stupidity warrants death, I should've been right there with the dead high school kid. Do we get what we deserve? Do we deserve what we get?

When people lose their homes in California earthquakes, we are tempted to conclude that those who build on a known fault line get what they deserve. When people lose their homes in Haiti, the suggestion of deserving does not arise for most of us – though even there, the suggestion of divine wrath on account of "wrong" indigenous religion was made by a few. Do we get what we deserve? Do we deserve what we get?

When ice skater Nancy Kerrigan was whacked in the knee by a pipe-wielding assailant, she famously cried, "Why me?" As it turned out, there was a reason – sort of. The attacker was associated with Kerrigan's archrival Tonya Harding. But when, along about the same time, a beloved parishioner of mine named Covington was whacked with a cruel and degenerative disease, he absolutely and explicitly refused to ask, "Why me?" He was more inclined to ask, "Why *not* me?" He knew that such undeserved suffering came upon countless people all the time, and he didn't suppose that he was so special as to be entitled to a protective force-field from the exigencies of this life. Do we get what we deserve? Do we deserve what we get?

In the Gospel lesson today [Luke 13:1-9] Jesus is asked about some Galileans who had been brutally killed by Pontius Pilate (we know not why), even as they themselves had been offering sacrifice, probably at the Temple. Their blood was spilled together with that of the animals they had been

sacrificing. The questioners would have typically assumed that for God to have allowed such cruelty, the Galileans must have done something especially sinful to deserve it. In response, Jesus compares their death to that of 18 others, victims of a freak accident, the collapsing of a tower. In either case, did they get what they deserved? Did they deserve what they got?

Jesus does not deny that members of either group were humanly sinful. In fact, he presumes they were. However, he denies the notion of a direct line between their putative brokenness and what happened to them. By pointing to the collapsed tower, by relating the parable of the fig tree which follows, Jesus directs us away from fixating on cause and effect.

Our Scriptures today suggest that neither chance nor grace follow our human notions of causality, predictability, fairness, or comprehension. They simply do not. The turn of events in our lives is often, like the mind of God itself, simply beyond our ken.

So, what then? It is often said that we do not have control over what *happens* to us; we have control only over how we *respond* to what happens to us. Typically this is said in the context of bad things. We may not have control over whether we sustain an accident or contract an illness. But how we live in the wake of that blow is within our direction. I believe this is fundamentally true. What today's Gospel suggests is that the same is true with reference to good things in our life as well. A vast slice of the good things that happen to us in life are equally beyond our control. That I grew up with parents who were nurturing and not abusive had nothing to do with me deserving it more than any other child. That I did not blow myself up in a garage while another kid did was not of my deserving. I did not and cannot control such good fortune. And neither can you. But what is within our control is how we respond – to both good fortune and bad.

Here's how Jesus tells it. If *deserving* is the issue, the barren fig tree would long ago have been cut down. It has no fruit; it is a waste of soil and of the gardener's time. But by virtue of the gardener's patience, the fig tree gets more time and more TLC. It's all about grace, of course. It's about God's abundant and patient grace with us. It's about God's willingness to hope and expect the very best for us and from us, despite our sad history of fruitlessness, our long record of messing up. And it is about responding to that grace by changing where we need to change. That is the meaning of 'repent,' you know – to change direction. The two parts of this morning's Gospel are both about responding to God's patience and grace with repentance, with a change of direction. It is about responding to undeserved misfortune and lost opportunity with endurance and hope; and it is about responding to undeserved good fortune and renewed opportunity with gratitude and the fruits of love.

Likewise, in our first lesson this morning from Exodus [3:1-15], the choice of Moses and his anointing as prophet and deliverer is not deserved. This is Moses, who had murdered a man in a fit of fury. This is Moses, who is slow of speech. This is Moses, who offers every excuse he can think of to avoid his divine appointment. "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh?" he says.

Who, indeed. But he responds, finally, with willingness, and by grace alone does he succeed.

In our second lesson [I Corinthians 10:1-13] the Apostle Paul reminds us how often grace and new opportunities have been presumed, taken for granted, wasted. When God brought the Israelites out of slavery, says Paul, they were baptized through the waters of the Red Sea, and they were sustained by manna from heaven and water from the rock. As Paul says, they “sat down to eat and drink” – they received God’s spiritual food and drink for nourishment. And then what did the Israelites do with this blessing? Too many of them then “rose up to play.” They engaged, we are told, in sexual immorality and in other forms of idolatry. And, despite all that had been done for them, they spent their time complaining. By implication, Paul points to our own blessings. We have likewise been baptized – by water at the font. We have likewise been sustained – by bread and wine at the altar. So, we too have “sat down to eat and drink” – partaken of God’s great abundance. And what now will we “rise up” to do with these blessings? Rise up to play – or rise up to pray? Rise up to mope – or rise up to hope? Rise up to “deserve” – or rise up to serve?

Do we get what we deserve? Do we deserve what we get? We know that, much of the time, we do not. The Scriptures suggest that, more often than not, we should be glad we don’t. Instead, Jesus has changed the question. Not, “Do I deserve what I get?” But instead, “How do I respond to what I get?”

Lent, as a time for reflection, invites me to consider myself in light of the fig tree. When I experience blessings, how do I respond? With an assumption of deservedness, or with a spirit of gratitude? When the renewed gift of time and opportunity are given me, how do I respond? With a presumption of entitlement, or with the fruits of love – which is service to God and to others?

And how about you? What are you doing with the misfortune and the good fortune of your life?