

NOT THE CENTER
Sermon for Lent 3C—Lk 13:1-9
LPC, 3/3/13

One of the things a mature and sane human being must learn in life is that he or she is not the center of the universe. For most of us this learning is a lifelong process. It generally begins early, say, when a child acquires a younger brother or sister, or attends preschool for the first time and must learn to share. For some of us this is a rather rude awakening.

The process continues, in ever-widening circles. We learn that our families are not the center of the universe, and then we learn that our own communities are not the center of the universe, even that our churches or our countries are not the center of the universe. It is of course possible to get stuck at any one of these stages. We don't think of it as getting stuck. We tend to think that defending our place in the universe is just standing up for our rights. And sometimes this is in fact the case. But sometimes it is not, and that makes problems.

In extreme forms, mistaking oneself, or one's own experience, for the center of the universe is mental illness. I know a person who has redefined reality according to what's inside her own head. She is just sane enough to be able to try to make other people and institutions fit into her private version of reality, and this has made a perfect mess.

God, who loves us, would just as soon we avoid the problems that come from thinking of ourselves as the center of the universe, and so God gave human beings some commandments. In a way, God's commandments are all ways of saying, "You, O person, are not the center of the universe."

Number one of the Ten Commandments says this more or less explicitly: God says, "I am God. You're not." Number two elaborates, adding, "And don't think you can set up another God of your own choice." Number three says, "Don't imagine that you can speak for God." Number four says, in part, "Even your time is not subject to your control, so how can you be the center of the universe?"

Number five is, for most of us, the first lesson we have in learning we are not the center of the universe. Number seven represents another stage in learning we are not the center of the universe. Marriage is a lesson in this truth like no other. Numbers six, eight, nine and ten are just variations on the same theme: You can't have everything you may want, because you are not the center of the universe.

We are Christians here and we can use theological language, like "sin." Regarding oneself as the center of the universe is sin.

Now we all know that we're not the center of the universe. But we don't always act as if we know it. I'm not just talking about the times when we kill, cheat, steal, lie or covet.

People persist in believing that when something bad happens, God is punishing them. I once heard a young woman newly diagnosed with breast cancer protest that she had always been good and God-fearing, so why was this happening to her? We all know better than to think this way, but it still happens.

When you think about it, however, this is just another example of imagining ourselves to be the centers of the universe. Not everything that happens is because of something we've done. We know this. Yet at times of stress, like that bad diagnosis, we can fall back into a more primitive belief.

Jesus in today's Gospel Lesson deals with the fallacy of bad behavior causing bad things to happen. He is asked about innocent people who were violated and killed by Herod, and about some folks a wall fell on. Jesus tells his listeners that the victims did not bring these things on themselves through evil deeds. Sometimes things happen that have nothing to do with our own behavior. This is a variation on the lesson that you are not the center of the universe.

But Jesus doesn't leave the subject there. He goes on to tell this story about the vineyard owner, the fig tree and the gardener. The fig tree is unproductive. The owner wants it cut down, which is logical enough. The gardener wants to nurture the tree and give it another chance. At first glance this seems like a total non-sequitur to the not-the-center-of-the-universe lesson.

Now it's not difficult to identify ourselves with the fig tree and Jesus as the helpful and intercessory gardener. One could interpret this story to mean that we have to produce in this life or we'll be cut down on the Day of Judgment, but I really don't think that's the point.

This story must be interpreted in context, and since the context of this story is that we're not the center of the universe, the message is this: whatever we produce that is good is through the agency of Christ Jesus. The fig tree does not produce without the ministrations of the gardener, and we cannot produce without the ministrations of our savior. Whatever good we do is ultimately from God. We are not the center of the universe. In fact we are helpless to do good without God.

There are other lessons to be taken from this, such as the fact Jesus always gives second chances, which is a good lesson for Lent.

But since Lent is also a time for self-examination and repentance from what distances us from God, let us remember that nothing distances us from God so much as sliding into that mindset of ourselves as the center of the universe. In what ways do we act as if we really believe we are the center of the universe? And when we do, should we act surprised when we find manure on our feet?