

## Uncommon Sense

Luke 13:1-9

One of the most highly valued attributes a person can possess is common sense. Common sense is considered to be an intuitive kind of intelligence. One that is grounded in personal observation and experience; and deductions stemming from obvious causes and effects. Lacking common sense tends to have its consequences. For instance, someone who goes to a restaurant and orders a pizza. When the pizza is brought to their table straight from the oven, there is steam rising from its surface. Common sense tells them that the pizza is really hot and to wait for it to cool off before attempting to eat it. But in their eagerness to taste the pizza, the person disregards that common-sense warning, bites into a slice, and suffers the consequence of searing the roof of his mouth with molten mozzarella.

Then, though, there are times when what seems like common sense turns out to be not as sensible as we might have thought. Such was the case when some people came to Jesus with the news that some Galileans had been killed by Pontius Pilate's soldiers while they were worshiping and presenting their sacrifices in the Temple. We can't know what their motive was for informing Jesus of this atrocity, but Jesus seizes the opportunity as a teaching moment. He asks them if they think that because this happened that it means those Galileans were "worse sinners" than anybody else.

He doesn't wait for their answer to that question; probably because he already knew what the answer would be. Which is, "Of course! They had to have been terrible sinners for something so awful as this to happen to them! That's just common sense!" And it was common sense. The common assumption was that God blessed righteous people and punished the unrighteous. Misfortune was considered to be God's means of dispensing justice in the world.

Misfortune as a kind of karmic justice *still* remains a common assumption, today, at least in the secret recesses of our subconscious minds. Maybe you've experienced this - you've done something that you feel a little bit guilty about, and then something bad happens - your car breaks down, a job interview goes badly, or you come down with the flu. Then you connect those dots in a way that tells you that your bad luck is a kind of punishment for whatever it is you did that you know you shouldn't have done.

Somewhere deep down inside, a part of us clings almost superstitiously to the notion that bad things come our way as a form of divine chastisement. Maybe even a kind of "common sense" about how the world works. The expression, "What goes around, comes around" is the underlying philosophy that people turn to, to explain the inexplicable events of life. The trouble with this attitude is that it doesn't really hold up under the scrutiny of reality. SOMETIMES people get what they have coming, whether punishments or rewards. But at least as often, what goes around DOESN'T come around. So, people look for ways to make sense of the

injustice of that disturbing reality. The “common-sense” explanation then becomes, that God is the immediate cause of everything that happens to people, so if bad things happen to some people, they must have somehow deserved it.

The people who brought the bad news to Jesus about the massacre in the Temple, seemed to be looking for him to affirm them in that viewpoint. But Jesus asks them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless YOU REPENT you will all perish as they did." Essentially, what Jesus tells them is that God does not work by striking down bad people with instant death or disaster. And if God DID work that way, every one of us should live life looking over our shoulder because none of us is perfect. Jesus goes on to tell a similar story to further make his point. This one is about 18 people who were crushed when a tower in the Jerusalem wall collapsed on them. Jesus asks again, "Do you think those 18 were worse offenders than anyone else in Jerusalem" just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time? Let's hope not, because if that's the case, we all better be careful about walking under towers ourselves, because none of us are blameless! Jesus gives the same advice, which is that instead of searching for moral reasons behind tragic situations like these, we ought to re-examine the belief that this is the way God acts and repent of the bad theology of that belief.

Jesus goes on to tell them a parable about how God DOES respond to human sin. The parable is about a fig tree. For three years, the owner of the fig tree comes expecting to find fruit growing on its branches. But it never does. So, the owner orders the tree to be cut down. Common sense tells the land owner that this unfruitful tree is only wasting soil that could be feeding a more productive and profitable tree. But the gardener talks the owner into giving the tree another chance. Another year to bear fruit. Instead of getting what it deserves - which would be to get cut down, the gardener wants to give it special attention, in the hopes that it will thrive. Common sense dictates that wasting more resources and labor on this useless tree is folly. The gardener, though, is relying something other than common sense. You could call the gardener's response to be one of “uncommon sense”.

Unlike common sense, which makes judgments about causes and effects based on observable phenomena, uncommon sense draws from spiritual revelation instead of physical observation. The best explanation of what distinguishes common and uncommon sense from each other is found in the passage from Isaiah: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Common sense has its limitations because it is based solely on the limited perspective of human observation as the basis of interpreting reality. After all, it was common sense that kept people believing that the earth is flat for most of human history. In about 300 BC, a Greek mathematician named Eratosthenes proved that the earth is in fact round. But for many centuries most people rejected the evidence, and clung to a belief in a flat earth. There are people who to this day refuse to believe the world is not flat.

As long as we live purely by the common sense of human wisdom, instead of the uncommon sense revealed to us in Jesus, many of life's injustices and tragedies will continue to be wrongly attributed to God's will. In the words of Albert Einstein, "Problems cannot be solved with the same mindset that created them." If we live with the mindset that problems like poverty, persecution, oppression and injustice are God's will for certain people, we will never do all that is on our power to solve them.

What Jesus teaches is this: bad things don't happen to some people because they are worse than everybody else. Bad things can happen to anyone at any moment. Things happen in the world that are not subject to easy answers. Try as we might, none of us can protect ourselves or anyone else from every danger. What we can do, and are called to do, is to identify and prevent sources of death and deprivation; and to minister to the victims of life's tragedies. What is asked of us is that we respond by faith with the uncommon sense born of believing that God (who we can't see) became like us in the person of Jesus (who we could see) so that we could become more like the people of compassion and mercy that God calls us to be.

The uncommon sense exercised by Jesus in this passage from Luke is that God is a not a God of impulsive rejection and punishment. Even an unfruitful fig tree gets extra care lavished upon it when common sense says it only deserves to be cut down. God is a God of justice, but above all, a God of second chances.

God, in other words, is a God of uncommon sense.

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