

**First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham**  
**Rev. Amy Morgan**  
**“Jesus Freakonomics”**  
**March 10, 2010**  
**Luke 13:1-9**

**Luke 13:1-9** *At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." <sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup> So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' <sup>8</sup> He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. <sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"*

"The most sensible way to calculate fear of death would be to think of it on a per-hour basis." So say the authors of the New York Times best-seller Freakonomics. They claim that "while it is true that many more people die each year in motor vehicle accidents than in airplane crashes...it's also true that most people spend a lot more time in cars than on airplanes...The per-hour death rate of driving versus flying...is about equal."

The authors of the book argue that there are two driving forces behind our overblown fear of flying in airplanes. The first is control. We can control the car we're driving, but not the airplane we're flying in. Most of us have a fair understanding of how a car operates but very little expertise in the field of airplane mechanics. The other fear factor here has to do with immediacy. Driving around in cars every day, we've become acclimated to the risk, however low or high it may be. We don't have a fear of immediate death while driving, or most of us wouldn't do it. But because most of us don't spend as much time on airplanes, our fear is compressed, and the risk of death seems much more immanent. That's why we fear terrorist attacks much more than heart attacks.

Statistically, if the federal government spent half as much money fighting heart disease as it does fighting terrorists, millions more American lives would be saved each year. But heart disease progresses slowly, and seems to be a common and less dreadful way to die than in a terrorist attack.

On a recent Saturday Night Live episode, weekly update host Seth Meyers reported that a woman who had been accidentally shot in a bar was saved when the bullet lodged in her love handles before it could reach any internal organs. The punch line was, "now the rolls of fat that saved her life can go back to slowly killing her."

The authors of *Freakonomics* encourage readers to use and interpret knowledge to better understand reality. Many of the conclusions in the book contradict conventional wisdom. In other words, we are statistically worried about the wrong things. Conventional wisdom of the first century said that bad things happened to sinful people and good things happened to good people. If God controlled everything, and God was just, then it only made sense that calamity, whether a politically motivated massacre or a naturally occurring disaster, represented God's just reaction to human behavior. Conventional wisdom today says that we should be more fearful of guns than swimming pools, terrorist attacks than heart attacks, and that if we do what all the experts say, our kids will be genius millionaires.

All of these things are statistically untrue.

The people in the crowd around Jesus thought they could save themselves by living righteously. But they distorted this belief in such a way that it allowed them to say, "since nothing really terrible has happened to me, I must be doing all right by God." Jesus begs to differ. He points out here that the people who suffered dreadful demises were no more or less sinful than the warm bodies in the crowd. Just prior to the section of the gospel we read today, Jesus has been warning the crowd of God's coming judgment. And then he calls them to "repent or perish." Everybody's got enough sin to deserve the same fate as those who died dreadfully.

But then, he tells them this strange parable about an unfruitful fig tree. Understood symbolically, the fig tree is supposed to represent Israel, and God is the owner and Jesus is the gardener who negotiates clemency. It has traditionally been interpreted to say that Israel is being granted more time to bear spiritual fruit, the one year timeline working as a parallel to the "year of the Lord's favor" Jesus declares he is ushering in. So in the end of this series, the message Jesus is communicating to the crowd is that God is just and will come to judge the world, people have the opportunity to repent and live, and God is mercifully patient.

This is the great paradox of the gospel: God is both just and merciful. As one commentator points out, in this portion of the gospel, "Luke does not destroy severity by infusing grace, nor does he destroy grace by infusing severity."<sup>1</sup> The gospel doesn't let us off the hook. The good news is not that whatever we do, think, or feel is okay 'cuz Jesus came and Jesus loves us. The gospel, the good news, is that we *can* repent and be forgiven. We don't have to perish because of our sin, the things we do to separate ourselves from God and each other.

Most of us, I would imagine, don't spend much time worrying about God's judgment. It doesn't seem like an immediate threat. For some of us, it might not seem realistic. We know that natural catastrophes happen and that they don't represent God's judgment on a sinful people. Okay, Pat Robertson obviously doesn't know this, but I'm hoping he's the exception to the rule.

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<sup>1</sup> Interpretation

On the other hand, how many times have you heard someone ask, or wondered yourself, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” One member of our congregation gave an interesting response to this question. She asked, “who’s good?” I think that’s exactly the point Jesus is making as he speaks to the crowd. Or, how many times have we told our children that Santa brings them toys because they’re good? The corollary is, of course, that those children who are not good do not get toys. As I discovered in conversation with my 4-year-old, this can lead them to believe that the reason some children don’t receive everything they want on Christmas morning is not because they are disadvantaged or the victims of circumstance. It is because they are not good. So there is certainly some lingering conventional wisdom that declares the good shall prosper and the bad will get their comeuppance.

I’d like to dispel some of that conventional wisdom with what I’ll call Jesus Freakonomics. While it’s not necessarily based on statistical evidence, it is based on the reality of God’s kingdom as revealed in God’s Word. Conventional wisdom says that “God helps those who help themselves” – and according to research from the Barna Group, a large percentage of Christians believe this message is actually contained in the bible.<sup>2</sup> It’s not. Jesus Freakonomics says God helps those who can’t help themselves. And by the way, that category describes 100% of the human population. Conventional wisdom says that ending or at least addressing poverty in our world is primarily the responsibility of governments, non-profit agencies and aid groups, or individuals. In studies conducted in the last year, the Barna Group found that just 4% of American adults believe that poverty is an issue that is primarily the responsibility of the church.<sup>3</sup> Jesus Freakonomics says “care for the widow and the orphan,” “lend to the poor without charging them interest,” and “blessed are the poor.” Jesus Freakonomics says “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor.” It says that Jesus came, first and foremost, to “bring good news to the poor.” Conventional wisdom says that we should throw parties for our friends and neighbors, but Jesus Freakonomics tells us “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” Conventional wisdom says that only those who publicly accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will go to heaven, and that’s all you have to do to get saved. But Jesus Freakonomics tells us “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

With this mountain of biblical evidence, we have to wonder how anyone might believe that poverty is not the church’s concern first and foremost. Conventional wisdom tells us that we are good enough, smart enough, and people like us. Jesus Freakonomics tells us that, while God created us good, we choose self-interest over generosity, power over humility, and death over life time after time. Conventional wisdom tells us that God has to be either just or merciful. Jesus Freakonomics tells us God is both.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/43-researcher-predicts-mounting-challenges-to-christian-church>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/12-faithspirituality/325-barna-studies-the-research-offers-a-year-in-review-perspective>

While Jesus Freakonomics is primarily based on what we find in the assembled report of God's self-revelation, there is one piece of statistical evidence that is key to understanding reality. Conventional wisdom says that if we drive the safest car, lock our doors, look both ways before we cross the street, get our annual health check-ups, live in the right part of town, and an endless list of other safety checks, we can live a long and fruitful life. But statistically, 100% of the people who live, also die. So those who would deny the reality of God's judgment, in whatever way you understand it, might want to reconsider. There will come a day when the world as we know it, our lives as we know it, will be no more. What comes after may be a holy mystery. But the truth is, and the truth that I think is being proclaimed in this conversation about the tower of Siloam and the massacre of the worshippers is, that no matter what we do – whether we drive or fly, live in bomb shelters or exercise every day, we cannot predict, nor can we avoid, the reality of death – dreadful or otherwise.

Death is not a form of judgment. Jesus, who the bible says was sinless, died one of the most dreadful deaths imaginable. However, death is a reality. After we die, as far as I know, we don't get the opportunity for repentance.

Let me explain. We may get the chance, should we need to, to ask *God's* forgiveness for what we have done or what we have left undone. But God has already extended forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Remember, *that's* the good news. What we don't get the opportunity to do after death is ask forgiveness of those we've wronged. We don't get the opportunity to turn our lives around, change course, re-focus on what's really important. In other words, we don't get to bear fruit. Once the tree is dead, there are no more second chances. God is patient and may give us another year, and another, and another. But most of us are so consumed with trying to keep ourselves safe and healthy, trying to blame death on misdiagnosis, poor quality control, or lack of personal discipline that we neglect to examine our own lives, reflect on what we need to be released from – for those of you who remember my releasing, renewing, restoring sermon way back in January – and we end up leading spiritually fruitless lives.

We can't control the final outcome of our lives. That's pretty well set. But if we give up trying to do just that, if we give up on the conventional wisdom that "he who dies with the most toys wins," then we can begin to live lives that truly bear fruit. We can live lives that are transformed and transform the world around us. Fruit is not a benefit to the tree. Fruit is a benefit to the hungry who eat from the tree.

So the question we've got to ask ourselves is not "are we safe enough?" "are we successful enough?" or "are we good enough?" The question we've got to ask ourselves is "whom are we feeding?" Who is benefiting from our lives? Is our life changing the world to make it look more like God's kingdom? How are we releasing, renewing, and restoring God's world?