Sunday, March 14, 2004
THAT'S LIFE
Luke 13:1-9

"That's life!" It's a statement frequently heard. You've said it. You've probably also noticed that people today describe life in a variety of ways. "That's life" is only one of them. I'll be using some other commonly heard phrases about life as the theme for future sermons. To whet your appetite, here are some of the statements people make about life which will be the basis of those sermons: "Get a life." "Life is everything." "Life is sacred." "A dog's life." "A charmed life." "Larger than life." "Life is a journey." "Life is good." "Take life as it comes." "Life in the fast lane." "You have one life." "Life is what you make it." "Life must go on." "Where there's life, there's hope." "Say 'yes' to life."

Sometimes it seems to me as if people use the word "life" as a substitute for the word "God." Thinking in today's world has become very "life-centered." A popular toast given at celebrations is, "To life." The word "God" is, of course, still used. For example, if one of your enemies gets what you think he deserves, you are apt to smile with satisfaction and say, "There is a God after all!"

A woman I know had an auto accident. Fortunately, no one was seriously hurt, and it was not possible to determine whose fault it was. When I asked her about the accident, she said in a philosophical way, "That's life." When I asked her what she meant by that statement, she said something like this: "It's been my experience that life in this world is in many ways unpredictable and unexplainable. Life often behaves like a contrary young person. It doesn't always conform to my expectations. Things happen for which there is no good explanation. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people."

Why is life this way? Is there a relationship between sin and suffering in human lives? Do bad people suffer more than good people? Do good people have less suffering in their lives than bad people? These were the questions some people were discussing with Jesus in the story read from Luke's gospel. They were telling Jesus about some Galileans who had been killed for no known reason by Pontius Pilate. They didn't directly ask the question, so Jesus put it into words for them: "Do you think that these Galileans suffered in this way because they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

Then Jesus posed another similar question. "What about those eighteen citizens of Jerusalem who were minding their own business when the tower of Siloam on the old part of the city wall collapsed on them and they were killed? Were they being punished by God for some evil they had done?" The same question could've been asked about the several thousand people who were going about their business when the terrorists flew the airplanes into the World Trade Center Twin Towers. Why were some killed and others survived? Were those killed more sinful than those who were not killed?

If you could answer "yes" to this question, it would seem to solve lots of problems. It answers the riddle of why bad things happen to people — bad things only happen to bad people. There is a God who directly punishes bad people. This God punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. It describes a God who obeys Newton's laws: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. It's a tempting equation, but according to Jesus, it is not an accurate one. Yet there are those who want to believe in the equation.

I'm sure every minister could tell a story like this one. A minister friend of mine told me about receiving a phone call to come sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the daughter had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on her optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery.

On the day of the operation, my minister friend found the mother sitting in the surgery waiting room beside an ashtray filled with cigarette butts. This happened years ago when smoking was still allowed in some parts of the hospital. The mother of the little girl smelled as if she had smoked every one of them.

She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned my minister friend to proceed cautiously. She sat down beside the mother, and after some small talk, the mother told her how awful it was. She said that she knew why all this suffering had come into her life and that of her five-year-old daughter. "It's my punishment," she said, "for smoking these awful cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so God made my daughter sick." Then she started crying so hard that what she said came out like a siren. "Now I'm supposed to stop smoking, but I can't. I'm killing my children."

This was difficult for my minister friend to accept, so she decided to answer in a direct way. She told the mother, "I don't believe in a God who would do that. The God I know is a God of love."

Later, when my friend was reflecting on what happened, she said, "The only problem with my quick response was that it messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one." Then my minister friend said to me, "I may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumor, but at that moment, the mother could not. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be an explainable reason. She was even willing to be that reason. At least that way, she could get a grip on the catastrophe."

You've had that experience. Calamity strikes, and you wonder what you did wrong. You scrutinize your behavior, your relationships, your diet, your beliefs. You hunt for some cause to explain the effect, in the hope that you can stop causing it. What you desire above all is at least some control over the chaos in your life. It is in the nature of human beings to search for answers and meaning.

So you can understand the questions posed to Jesus about the relationship between sinners and suffering. On another occasion, when a man who had been born blind was presented to Jesus for healing, the disciples asked him, "Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Their assumption was that there was an explainable reason for his having been born blind. Someone sinned, and blindness was the punishment.

When things go right for you, you might assume that it's because you are living right, and when things go wrong, you could assume that it's because you are living wrong. Suffering goes with sin. Every child knows this rule: When I do good, I am rewarded. When I do wrong, I'm punished. Isn't this how it is with God? And Jesus says, "No, that's not how it works with God."

Many times, of course, these assumptions are correct in your day-to-day living. If you are careful in the way you drive your car, you will be less likely to have an accident. But it's also true that despite your careful driving, someone who is not as careful could cause you to have an accident. That's life.

Again, in some cases, it is true that suffering goes with wrong behavior or what you might call sin. If you commit a crime and end up in jail; if you lie and your reputation is ruined; if you run short of money because you lost it all gambling, then your own behavior has caused your suffering.

All people know of specific instances where sin and suffering are connected. But Jesus said that you cannot make it a hard and fast rule in every situation. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. As Jesus said in another place, "God makes the sun to shine on the good and the evil, and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." Or as you might say, "That's life!"

The mystery of why some good people suffer and some bad people prosper is a universal one. For thousands of years, human beings have pondered these questions, and they should continue to be asked. Sometimes you can discover a connection, and then some suffering can be prevented in the future.

However, it's helpful to also remember that suffering comes to you in a variety of ways, whether you are good or bad. There is physical suffering and mental suffering. You can live in a beautiful home and have children who are doing well in school. But if at the same time you are being divorced by your spouse of twenty years and know you are no longer loved, and you sense that you are being legally and publicly rejected, you know what suffering is.

Or you could be a man or woman of fifty and be told by your employer that you are no longer needed. You could be a person who seems to have everything — business success, social prestige, money, good looks — yet struggles with some secret sin and guilt, suffering more than anyone will ever realize. A lot of suffering is hidden. There is the suffering of the adolescent who is trying to understand his or her self-identity.

There is the suffering of the hungry, the homeless, the prisoner, the refugee, the abused spouse or child who can't understand why they are the object of such cruelty. There is the suffering of prolonged and painful illness, which can bring with it the craving for death. And there is the suffering of those who stand by the bedside and watch someone they love writhe in pain.

There is the suffering that comes from the untimely death of someone you love. There is the suffering you bear from unjust criticism, gossip, and complaining people. There is the suffering of parents who watch their child get in with the wrong crowd, make disastrous decisions, and waste their talent or ability.

Why suffering comes to people, whether they are good or bad, continues to be a nagging question. Jesus does not answer it directly. Instead, he implies that it is the wrong question. I believe the reason he rejected this question is because it causes you to lay blame and find fault in others. You can point your finger and say that someone is getting what they deserve and even feel self-righteous in the process.

Jesus wants you to stop comparing your spiritual pulse with others. He wants you to stop judging who's truly blessed and who isn't because of their behavior.

According to Jesus, there is no adequate or satisfying explanation for most of life's unfairness. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. Good things that you don't deserve also come to you. There are times when you can find no one to blame or give credit. That's life.

All you can do is continue to examine your own relationship to others and to God. If those relationships are in order, then much of the suffering, confusion, and tragedy — even though unfair and undeserved — will be more bearable because you know that others and God are suffering with you. That's why the 23rd Psalm is so treasured by people who are suffering, especially that one sentence: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

Or take a human example. What is the most comfort to you? You are suffering deeply, and someone tries to bolster your spirits by speaking words of encouragement — all done with the best of intentions. But here is another friend who comes and sits and suffers with you, maybe speaking very few words. Does not the friend who sits and feels your suffering bring you a comfort far deeper than words?

It is the good news of the Christian faith that God is even closer in your suffering than your closest friend. God is also in that friend, and God is also in you. You are created in God's image. Therefore, your sufferings are also God's sufferings.

Yet the fact remains that there is always a mystery to suffering and a mystery to the joy in life. Oftentimes life seems to be absurd. Would you like it better if life could be simplified and more controllable, no surprises, no ups or downs? I don't think so. Although life is sometimes excessive, sometimes lacking, sometimes rational and sometimes irrational, sometimes sad and sometimes joyful, I'm not sure that I would want it any different. According to Jesus, "That's life!" Amen.