

Dissecting the Triangles
A Sermon on Luke 13:31-35 by the Rev. Philip Major
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We will take a closer look at the story of Jesus and the pharisees in a few minutes, but first let's think about a more familiar story. The story I'm thinking of is one where there is a good kid playing on the playground. He is the sort of kid who tries to do the right thing. He is conscientious. He isn't rude to the teacher. He is exactly the sort of kid the bullies like to pick on.

You have certainly seen this sort of story before. The bully will choose the conscientious, vulnerable child as the one to pick on. The bully will steal the good kid's lunch. The bully will trip the good kid as he is walking down the hallway. If you are like me, you are looking for the person who will rescue the good kid from the bully. Perhaps it will be another kid in the class. Perhaps it will be a teacher.

We often think of the story of life taking place in triangles like this. We call them drama triangles. There is always a villain. The villain threatens or attacks the good guys. Then we need a hero to rescue the good guys from the villain. The villain, the good guys and the rescuer: these are the essential parts of the drama triangle.

The drama triangle makes for an interesting story, but it doesn't make for a very good life. The relationships in the drama triangle are relationships of assaults and helplessness and rescues. These are not the relationships we want to be in. We want to be in direct relationships, relationships of empowerment, honesty and engagement.

This is a big theme in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yahweh always wants the people of Israel to be in a direct, honest relationship with Yahweh. The people don't have the strength or the willingness to engage in direct, honest relationships with Yahweh. The people of Israel are always looking for someone else to rescue them.

The people of Israel are the good guys in the story; that doesn't mean they are always doing the right thing. The people of Israel are like the good kids, the little, conscientious polite kids on the playground. Over and over again the people of Israel are threatened by the bullies in the neighborhood. About 700 years before the time of Jesus, the bully is Sennacharib, king of Assyria. The Assyrians overrun the Northern Kingdom of Israel. About 100 years later there is just a little piece of Israel left, the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Now the bully is Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon. At the pivotal moment in the epic story of the Hebrew Scriptures, right before the destruction of Jerusalem, the people of Israel are looking for someone to rescue them. They turn to Egypt, the country where they were slaves, to rescue them from the Babylonian army. Of course this doesn't work. The Egyptians don't rescue Judah. The Babylonians quickly overrun the tiny kingdom. They lay siege to the city of Jerusalem and destroy the Temple of Solomon.

We don't want to be in these drama triangles. We shouldn't think of ourselves as the victims, even if we think we are the good guys. We shouldn't be looking for someone to rescue us. One of the reasons we should avoid the drama triangles is that it leaves us vulnerable to being manipulated by ruthless, power-hungry leaders. The drama triangle is essential for any authoritarian leader. Drama triangles leave us vulnerable to manipulation.

That is what the president of Russia has done. Putin has told the Russian people they are under threat from the Ukrainians, and that he will rescue them. The story is completely absurd; that doesn't mean people will see through the lies.

We in the United States are just as susceptible to manipulations of the drama triangle as anyone else. After the Civil War power hungry leaders in the United States told poor white people they were threatened by black people. The story was completely absurd; that didn't mean people would see the truth.

Seven years ago a candidate for president told an absurd story. As always, it was a drama triangle story. This man told us that we, as Americans, were victims. He said we were victims of allies who took advantage of us. He said we were threatened by immigrants from Mexico. He named himself as the rescuer in the drama triangle. He said, "I alone can fix it." Many millions of people believed him.

I can understand in a way. Life is uncertain. We would like someone to rescue us from the uncertainty. We feel threatened. Sometimes we long for a hero to defeat the people who seem threatening to us.

The words of the person who promises to rescue us lead us only to misery and grief. That is what happened to the people of Germany in the 1930s and 40s. That is what has been happening in America for the past seven years. That is what is happening in Russia right now.

The relationships in the drama triangle are relationships of threats and helplessness and rescues. These are not relationships based in honesty or equality. We need to be in relationships that respect that fact that each person is created in the image of God. We need to be in relationships of engagement and empowerment.

This is what Jesus is concerned about in this passage from Luke 13. *Some Pharisees came and said to Jesus, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you."* The Pharisees are framing this as a drama triangle story. They want to be seen as the rescuers.

The Pharisees are completely missing the point. The Pharisees warn Jesus to escape from Jerusalem so his life will be saved. But Jesus doesn't need to be rescued. Jesus knows he will be killed in Jerusalem. He leaves Jerusalem, not in order to save himself from being captured, but so that he can finish his work.

Jesus leaves for just a few days. Jesus refuses to be rescued, but engages more deeply and intensely in his work. The next six chapters of Luke cover the span of just three days, three days of Jesus telling the truth and spreading the good news that God's salvation is for all. Instead of heeding the warning of the Pharisees, Jesus uses their warning as an opportunity to tell the truth that he knows that doing the work of God's kingdom comes with a portion of suffering.

The Pharisees want, and we often want, this to be a story of villains and victims and rescues. The Pharisees think the story is about the relationship between Jesus and the villain, Herod. Jesus says the story is about his relationship with God. All of the other relationships are secondary.

We have a way of turning every story into a drama triangle. Jesus says, *How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!* We would love for this story to happen. It would make such a great movie. Herod or the other bad guys would be the villains. We would be like the chicks, the innocent, oblivious, helpless animals. Jesus would be the hero, rushing in to rescue us.

We are so interested in creating drama triangles, we create extra characters in our stories. We go so far as to turn our cities into characters in the story. In this passage we sometimes think of the city of Jerusalem as a sort of character. We may think Jesus will rescue the city of Jerusalem.

Many times people have been mobilized to fight a war to save the honor or the purity or the heritage of a place. We are missing the point. In our faith, places and buildings are not sacred. Jerusalem is not something sacred, something to be rescued.

Jesus says, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ...how often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing." Jesus is not concerned for the bricks and the stones and the buildings of the city. Jesus is concerned for the people. Places are not created in the image of God. People are created in the image of God.

Jesus does not come to rescue us from the villains. Jesus comes to reconcile us to God. Jesus wants goodness and life for the people, the ones created in the image of God.

There will be times when we will suffer. If we are striving for the goodness of God's creation, and especially for the goodness of the people, our suffering will not be in vain. We follow the way Jesus showed us. It is not a way of helplessness or victimhood. It is Jesus' way of learning and telling the truth. It is Jesus' way of engaging with those created in the image of God. It is Jesus' way of serving the people God has placed in our lives.