



University Christian Church – Austin

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Fear's Unveiling

Lent 3, c, March 7, 2010

Luke 13:1-9

There are two major teachings that jump out at us in this morning's scripture passage from the Gospel of Lukeⁱ. The first one is found in 13:1-5. In it Jesus is responding to news of two groups of people who had died. The first group was composed of several Galileans who had gone to the Temple in Jerusalem to offer their religious sacrifices. For reasons that are not made clear to us, Pilate the Roman Procurator, had them killed as they came to Jerusalem to make their required religious sacrifice. This was a clear human evil done to other human beings. Was this a punishment from God because of their sinfulness? Jesus says “no” that these Galileans were no worse sinners than other Galileans.

The second group of people was 18 unfortunate souls who were killed when the tower of Siloam in Jerusalem happened to fall on them it as they were visiting it. Again, Jesus says that they were no worse sinners than other people living in Jerusalem. Jesus goes out of his way to disassociate bad things happening to people and their sinfulness, which was then the common assumption of the day-- that is, if something bad happened to you, then you had done something to deserve it. Jesus flatly denies that thinking. ii

So Jesus was clear on this first point. When we suffer or someone else suffers, we cannot assume that they are suffering because of some special sinfulness.

That said, however, Jesus ends both of those examples with a challenging word, "I tell you, but unless you repent, you will also perish as they did." Now we begin to wrestle with the spiritual teaching that we need to hear even if we don't want to hear it. The rest of this passage is dealing with the need to repent.

"Repent" is one of those words that carries tremendous negative baggage. We see caustic street corner preachers condemning passersby with it. We hear moralistic teachers proclaiming it as everyone's basic need. With this hammer word, people have been driven to confession, but they have also been driven away from the church, so to find it so centrally on Jesus' lips... might catch us up short.

Is Jesus trying to put fear into our hearts with this message? To some extent the answer is "yes." One thing that a good dose of fear does is rip away some of our precious illusions, such as:

- the illusion that we've unlimited time get ourselves in gear with God's plan for us;
- the illusion that morally speaking everything is OK in our lives; and its corollary;

- the illusion that we each have no need to repent. It may be painful to pull this hard shell off. It may be uncomfortable, but apparently Jesus believes that if a good dose of fear peels back the veil so that we can see our real self... and our very real need to overhaul our lives with God's help, then such fear is a good thing. Eventually, that fear will be relieved when we have made the necessary changes, but until then, this is a healthy fear that pushes us in the right direction.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus goes on with the theme. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. After three years of patiently encouraging that fig tree to do what it's supposed to do, produce figs, the owner is fed up and ready to rip the tree out and put something in that will produce fruit. "Why should it be wasting the soil?"

The allusion very clearly is to God being fed up with all of us when we don't produce the fruit we are supposed to produce. It's not just about our believing in God or trusting in God, but it is about our lives turning around – repenting- and producing the fruits of righteousness. The story ends with the gardener standing up for the fruitless tree and saying just give me one more chance with the tree. I'll give some fertilizer and some tender loving care and let's see if we can turn it into a fruit producer. But if doesn't turn around, I'll cut it down for you.

One of the problems with the word "repent" is that we might think of it meaning folks needing to give up some bad practice or habit. Alcoholics, drug addicts, unfaithful spouses, and bank robbers... they need to repent. We might say to God, "I never physically hurt anybody in a fit of anger. I never cheated in a business deal. I never cut corner's in my work. I try to treat people fairly." We would prefer to see ourselves as innocent... without need for big time changes in our way of living.

There is a story of how King Frederick II, an Eighteenth Century King of Prussia, was visiting a prison in Berlin. He was going from inmate to inmate, and every one of them was trying to prove how they had been unjustly imprisoned. They all proclaimed their innocence, except one.

That one prisoner was sitting quietly in a corner, while all the rest protested their innocence. Seeing him sitting there oblivious to everything else that was going on, the King walked over to him and said, "Son, why are you in here?" He

said, "Armed robbery, your Honor," The King said, "Are you guilty?" He said, "Sire, I am guilty, and I deserve to be here." The King then gave an order to the guard and said, "Release this guilty man, I do not want this man corrupting all these other innocent people." ^{iv}

The real peril of our spiritual condition doesn't become obvious when we compare ourselves to most other people. The glaring brokenness becomes clear when we compare the way we live to the way we would be living if we were living as God calls us. So we haven't done terrible things to others...

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- what have we done really positively, substantially help the poor?
 - Where and how often have our lives demonstrated loving care for the neediest, the least able; the forgotten, the feeble?
 - What have we personally done to reduce the injustice in our city, in our country, in the wider world?
 - What have we done to preserve our earth? Reduce our consumption, to cut back our pollution, and degradation of it?
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When we take a hard look at our lives in the light of God's high calling to us, the words of Is. 64 seems appropriate, "all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away."

Yes, Jesus parable is about just such folks... who are doing alright to societal standards... but way under productive by Jesus' standards. We are the ones on the chopping block. Yes, Jesus is still demonstrating a kind, loving, trustworthy God, but we are not just passive recipients of goodness. We are expected to be actively bringing in God's rule, God's justice, God's peace, and if we're not doing it we are wasting God's opportunities. According to the parable, God does not have limitless patience with us.

Jim Wallis, one of the founding members of the "Sojourners" community in Washington, D.C., puts the point this way:

“Many think conversion [and repentance] is only for nonbelievers, but the Bible sees conversion as also necessary for the erring believer, the lukewarm community of faith, the people of God who have fallen into disobedience and idolatry ... [Our task] is not to make the gospel easy but to make it clear ... evangelism should call for (and expect) a radical change in behavior and lifestyle.”^v

And speaking of Washington, D.C., it so happens there is a wonderful example of a congregation there truly living out their call to servanthood in Christ's name.^{vi} The Church of the Saviour – like UCC- was founded in the 1940's. They have never in those years been as large a congregation numerically as we are here today, but because of strong sense of the calling of God to serve their community they've developed over forty ongoing community outreach ministries including:

Good Hope House providing Transitional housing for women and children

Christ House providing Residential medical care for homeless men and women

Columbia Road Health Service Medical clinic

Cornerstone A community of caring where formerly homeless people with AIDS and chronic substance abuse can rest, heal and grow towards a positive future

Enterprising Staffing Services Offering Job placement assistance to poorest

The Family Place Drop-in center for families of young children

Joseph's House Hospice for homeless persons with AIDS and other critical illness

Jubilee Housing Affordable housing for low-income individuals and families

Miriam's House Residence for homeless women with AIDS and their children

What ties together all these forms of ministry is an the intense desire of the members of the Church of the Saviour to provide for the needy in their community as the Spirit of Jesus calls them to do. Where does that intense desire come from?

Ann Dean, one of the members of the church said, “You see, most people who learn about our church learn about it because the mission work is so interesting and dramatic. And it's so needed. But the heart of it is that the members see Jesus and need and want to serve him there.” And that service... that deeply committed service comes about as they, and as we, relinquish ourselves to the Holy Spirit which will turn us completely around, change us thoroughly, in repentance – if we will truly allow it.

Let us pray....

Loving God, Holy God... We do now hear Your high calling for us. We do desire to be your holy people and to follow in the path of transformation, the path of repentance. Take us then, and help us each to cross every barrier that would keep us from a deeper, more faithful following of Your way. This we ask in name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

i Crossan considers vs. 1-5 not authentic, but verse 6-9 are authentically Jesus'. Source http://jesusdatabase.org/index.php?title=Crossan_Inventory_Stratum3

ii There are other cases of this denial as well. In John 9:2, “ his disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered “neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him.’ And also in Matthew 5: 45 “for he [God] makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.”

iii As Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 7:9ff “Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance; for you felt a godly grief, so that you were not harmed in any way by us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation” (NRSV)

iv Quoted from “**Turn Right with the Right Turn**” a sermon by James Merritt .

v Jim Wallis, *The Call To Conversion: Recovering the Gospel for These Times* (Harper San Francisco, 1992), pp. 7, 17.

vi See a story about the Church of the Saviour produced in 1997 at <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week109/feature.html>