

Taking God Seriously

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Third Sunday of Lent—March 7, 2010

First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN

OLD TESTAMENT: Isaiah 55:1-9

Listen, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.

See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples.

See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near;

let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts;

let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

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.

GOSPEL: Luke 13: 1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Silo'am fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

6 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. 7 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?" 8 He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

If "giving something up for Lent" is a traditional way of talking about intentionally placing a period of time in God's hands so that God might increase our faith, as I suggested last week, then repentance is the far more familiar way of talking about that same basic movement in our lives. Repentance, as I am sure you have heard, simply means "to change one's mind," or perhaps more accurately, "change one's outlook or direction." If you have ever started out to do something, only to discover that your first decision was inaccurate or even plainly wrong, and you have "course-corrected," then you know something about what "repentance" means.

But just as "giving something up for Lent" can become a spiritual cliché, as well as a literal one, "repentance" is a word that can conjure up all kinds of feelings and thoughts that may or may not be very helpful.

For me, because I have been swimming in church waters and in Southern church waters for so long, part of me imagines repentance to be a demand from God that I completely

reinvent myself. It feels not so much like “repair and restoration,” as demolition and new construction. And the truth is that I simply cannot do that. Perhaps some people really can, but what I discover is that no matter how much I try to do a complete overhaul on myself, I wind up with the same basic lump of play-doh, which is my oh-so human, flesh and blood self.

Perhaps you have discovered the same thing when you have determined to go on a diet or dramatically improve your use of time, or revive your prayer life or finally set aside the time to read your Bible regularly. Maybe you have succeeded dramatically, and if so, I celebrate with you. But if you are like me, you find that your commitment fades and are left to wonder what good it did to try to begin with.

I don’t mention this dilemma to discourage us from trying. Far from it. In fact, the point I want finally to make is that all these efforts really do matter, just maybe not in the way I or my ego might expect or want. Part of this dilemma, I deeply suspect and actually strongly believe, is a sign that if you and I ever think we can do things entirely on our own or out of our own will power, then we are on the wrong road to start with and will need to do some “course-correcting,” some “repenting”, very near the start.

Because, inherent in the faith of Abraham last week, or the message of repentance this week, is the discovery of how serious God is about God’s promises and our own decision to take God seriously in response. Above all, that means we stop looking for ways to separate ourselves from God, and from others, by acting as though we are somehow in a category all by ourselves, disconnected from everyone else.

I hear this blaring out of the text from Luke this morning. “Do you really think that the people whom Pilate murdered, or the people on whom the tower of Siloam fell, were really different from you?” Jesus asks. Ouch. The truth is that as fallen human beings we actually want to say, “yes, surely they were.”

It may be out of a fear of facing our fragile humanity, or it may be out of an even more ugly self-righteousness, but we resist recognizing that what happens to other people, like an earthquake in Haiti or Chile, or a bus accident in Arizona, or any other tragedy that scares us—that those things really could happen to us. And in failing to recognize that with a sense of humility, we are headed down the wrong road, as far as Jesus is concerned.

Imagine that you have just suffered the loss of a person you love, or your house burned, or you were in Haiti and have been devastated by an earthquake, and you got a card from a friend of yours. You open it and inside it reads, “Looks like things finally caught up with you. I am so happy it didn’t happen to me. Love...”

I don’t think many of us would appreciate a card like that, or think it was appropriate. But Jesus tells us why. Such thoughts reflect a confidence in our own goodness and a latent hatred of the people who have suffered. On the one hand, it reflects the sin of self-righteousness, as if I have no need for any further growth or changes in my life. On the other hand, it reflects a willful failure to love, which is completely at odds with the very reason Jesus, the incarnation of divine love, is there among people as God in the flesh.

So, every time I feel the desire to separate myself from or to take some sick enjoyment of someone else’s misery, I can be sure I *need to repent*. Because to take God seriously at just such moments is to realize that all of us are fragile, sin-prone human beings, living in a fragile death-stung world, traveling through a vast cold expanse of lifelessness, with nothing but God’s mercy and the power of love expressed within human bodily existence to sustain us. And, that this is true of any of us and all of us. There is “no distinction” when it comes to the fragility of human life and human virtue. What happens to others can, and indeed may, happen to me. For I am not immortal or special. I too need the goodness of God and the love of God and others, just as everyone else does.

There seem to me to be two related lessons to learn from all this. The first is that the

failure to take to heart what we see happen to others should be deeply troubling to us all.

I recall a Christmas Eve when Emma and I were coming home to Tennessee from Chicago, and a powerful “snow squall” was blowing across Illinois and Indiana. Now because I thought I was so smart, I reasoned that rather than try to race to outrun the storm as it moved East, we could go west and count on the snowplows to have cleared the roads in its wake. Regardless of what happened in Indiana—we will never know—clearly the decision to go west and take I-57 was a bad one.

The same, sickening pattern quickly took shape. We would all form up, two full lanes of traffic and drive like mad, until the cars up front spotted ice or packed snow on the road and slammed on their brakes. The ten or so cars directly behind them would scatter into the right of way and in the median. But rather than learn anything from what just happened, we survivors would form up into two packed lanes, drive like mad until the cars up front saw ice and slammed on their brakes and the cars right behind them would go flying into right of way and the median. Over and over and over. And I was right in there with them. It was a frightening failure to learn from the suffering of others. And you will notice that none of us were stopping to help those in trouble. We just assumed we were on our own—and just smarter than they must have been.

I am afraid this is how it goes with us, too, especially me. Once I begin to think I am smarter or morally superior to someone else in trouble, it seems to follow like daylight from dark that there is no call on me to help them. What happens to them somehow won't happen to me—and in fact, they somehow deserve their problems, while I surely don't.

And when I think that way, I believe I am on truly dangerously slick, frozen ground.

That leads me to the second lesson that I think comes out of this text to us, namely, that what happens to other people actually HAS happened to me, because I am connected to every other creature of God, both because we all come from the same source of life and, even more profoundly, because in the incarnation, God has become one with all of us through the body of Jesus Christ. Therefore, whatever happens to “any-body” happens to Jesus himself and thus to me and to you, just as whatever happens to me and my body happens to Jesus and to all of you. In the body of Christ, we are truly meant to be gathered up—every last one of us human beings—into the body of Jesus Christ. And we live that reality out by reaching out to each other, as Jesus does, both inside the church and beyond the existing, awakened relationships which the church currently shares with the whole world.

It is a similar thought which brought forth John Donne's famous poem, “For Whom the Bell Tolls.” It always tolls for us, because we are all connected on this small fragile planet, sharing in a fragile, sin-wounded, human, bodily existence, all creatures and companions of the One God who has given us life—and life together.

The idea that I can and will get through life on my own—perhaps with God, perhaps without—or, the idea that somehow I am in my own little car, and it is my only goal to get through to where I am going—with or without you and the other people on this planet—these ideas, I believe, may be the place where most of our genuine repentance needs to take place.

For in neither case am I taking God seriously, and in both cases I am reflecting a decided aversion to, if not hostility to, the reality and the call of divine love.

Certainly, there is much we can do to repent. The chapter before this one in Luke is a virtual catalog of places where repentance might and should begin. Luke 12 starts with a reminder that if we think our private thoughts and conversations are somehow truly private, we have some genuinely new thoughts to start thinking. If we are living our lives based on how we are doing in the eyes of other people, then we have some real course-correction to make. If we really believe that life is found in the amount of money or possessions we have, then we have some hard thinking to do, and maybe some sweat should break out on our foreheads as we do it. If we think we can worry our way into a feeling of security, or if we

think we can predict how life is going to go for ourselves or for the world, then we are seriously, seriously in the ditch already.

But it is here in Luke 13, precisely when Jesus is reflecting on the pain and the suffering of others, that we hear these chilling words “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” I can’t take the razor-sharp directness off those words. And we shouldn’t try, because if we can justify being cold or cruel to those in pain or take satisfaction in deaths, we truly are in danger of falling off the cliff spiritually. We need to change direction in a big way. And now.

We see that in the next story, when a woman in trouble comes into the synagogue and Jesus reaches out to her, only to be lectured that it was the wrong day to help someone like her. The one doing the lecturing doesn’t want to have to think about compassion for a person in trouble right now as an essential part of “getting through life” with God. We may want to continue to use religious language—as when I call Emma “dear” but really mean that I have no interest in what she is saying. But down deep, despite the seeming “term of affection,” the real tone of voice says that I want to be left alone and get on with what I want to do on my own. Religious people can fall into that same tone of voice with God.

But there is really no difference between that day in the synagogue and what I recall so vividly one Sunday while standing on I-40. I was staring at the bottom of our church bus as it lay on its side, after it had hit a bridge abutment, gone airborne, crashed nose-first back into the concrete railing and had then flipped tail over nose and had slid backward down the interstate, leaving 53 kids hurt, some of them very badly. I had been driving a second bus following a short distance back, and after I could see the green nose of our bus pointed back at me, I came running up. While I was still staggered by my disbelief, I had to jump out of the way of a commercial passenger bus determined to wind through the wreckage and bodies so that, I assume, it could keep its time own schedule. Never mind the fact that people who did stop to help were frantically looking for a fire extinguisher to put out a fire in the engine, something that commercial bus no doubt had on board. I repented that day of times I had done more of what that bus did than the people who had stopped to help.

I wasn’t through repenting that Sunday, however, because even though a bus failed to stop and help, it “just so happened” that the entire emergency response team for a three-county area was holding a picnic a few miles away, after recently practicing their procedures for a major accident on, yes, I-40. And it “just so happened” that a medical wing of the local air national guard was on a maneuvers just a few miles away in the other direction. So within minutes, ambulances rolled up and military helicopters landed all around me, like angels from heaven, and within 40 minutes of the wreck, everyone from that wrecked bus was on her or his way to a hospital. Every single one of them survived, and all of them recovered, often with astonishing speed. I learned again that day what I do indeed need to work on every day, namely, taking God seriously. To remember that God takes us very seriously indeed, and every action we take for good, no matter how small, truly does matter. Who knew a picnic would be a divine calling that day? We are all on the way, not just to where we think are going, but to where God knows we are needed.

Today let us remember that, as Isaiah says, what we most need God offers, without price, without hesitation to all. Let us receive those gifts and share them in the same way. Let us remember that to acknowledge our need of grace is a very good thing, for us and for all those around us. For in doing so, our hearts and lives are open to the power of God’s love, the greatest power in the world, for ourselves and for others, because God is seeking to bring us all home safely. The love of God given and shared among human beings is the hope of the world. It is the reason why we can, with unflinching confidence, with all humility and all seriousness, rely on the promises of God in Jesus Christ to all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.