

Oklahoma, Oklahoma
A Sermon on Luke 13:31-35
Second Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2019

Introduction

When we talk about the historical Jesus, it is easy to treat the words of the historical Jesus as what really matters, that what the gospel writer adds is not as important.

That would be a mistake. The evangelists sometimes add words of pure gospel. Matthew crafted much of the Sermon on the Mount. Luke created the Magnificat and the Road to Emmaus. John wrote the Prologue and several discourses that are dear to people: I am the Bread of Life, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Vine. Is anything more sacred to us than Luke's birth story, which we read every Christmas Eve?

Today's story is almost certainly from the hand of Luke not the historical Jesus. There is still plenty of good news in it. It is a lament that offers the people words of comfort and a chance for repentance.

First Move: The Lament for Jerusalem

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, which covers Chapters 9 through 19 in Luke. The Pharisees are good guys in today's Scripture. They warn Jesus, "Depart and go from here because Herod wants to kill you." Luke is more favorable to the Pharisees than the other Gospels. He is critical of them at times, and at other times he shows them as friends of the Christ followers.

The Pharisees warn Jesus about Herod Antipas. This is not Herod the Great, who was the king of Judea when Jesus was born. Antipas is the son of Herod the Great. When Herod died, his kingdom was split into three parts and given to his three sons. They were called tetrarchs instead of kings. Herod Antipas rules over Galilee. Antipas is the tetrach who beheaded John the Baptist.

This may be another reason why Jesus is going to Jerusalem. Jesus has been preaching and teaching and healing in Galilee. Antipas has already beheaded one prophet. Jesus may already know that Antipas wants to silence him.

Jesus says to the Pharisees, "Tell that fox, 'Behold, I am casting out demons and performing healings.'" Jesus knows that Antipas is clever and calls him a fox.

That doesn't stop him from doing the work of God's kingdom, healing the sick and the possessed and bringing them back into community.

Then Jesus turns his attention to Jerusalem. He cries out in lament. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills prophets and stones those who have been sent to her."

Jesus may be quoting from Jeremiah 38. The Babylonians are in the process of conquering Judah. Jeremiah tells the Judean king that he should trust in God and sue for peace, that the people will be slaughtered if they fight the Babylonians. The king accuses Jeremiah of treason and throws him in jail. The king ignores the prophet, and the Babylonians conquer Jerusalem.

The lament, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem" doesn't make much sense for the historical Jesus. He has no reason to lament over Jerusalem. It is Luke's lament. Luke is looking back on the Jewish Revolt against Rome, about 35 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Luke may be lamenting the destruction that came to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Luke's Jesus describes Jerusalem as "the one who kills prophets and stones those who have been sent to her." Luke shows us Jesus as a prophet. The angels in Luke's Christmas story tell the shepherds in the fields, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." God brings the promise of peace through Jesus, but the Israelites reject peace and begin an armed rebellion against Rome. They are slaughtered and the Temple is destroyed.

Jesus is a true prophet. He cares about the people. He is not just a shrill voice that predicts that God will bring destruction on the people. The prophet has a deeper capacity for empathy. He has a deeper feeling of the pain of others. Jesus says that he wishes he could be a mother hen and bring Jerusalem under his wing like baby chicks, but the Jerusalem did not want to.

Jesus laments that Jerusalem will not know peace until it repents of its warlike ways. It must turn away from reliance on weapons and turn to God and non-violence. This is why this text is on the Lectionary on the Second Sunday in Lent: Jesus urges the people to repent.

Luke's Jesus predicts that the people will turn to Jesus when he returns, apparently at his second coming. Luke's hope is that all of Israel will greet Jesus with the blessing that he will receive from the crowds on Palm Sunday, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." Jews today would not see this as good news. They have a path to God without Jesus.

Luke also has another purpose in writing this story. There has been a revolution in scholarship about the Gospel of Luke in the last 20 years. Scholars now believe that it is most likely that Luke was written in its final form around 120 CE, not 90 CE

which was the earlier consensus. New Testament scholars such as Joseph Tyson and Richard Pervo argue that the Gospel of Luke in its final form was intended as a response to Marcion. Mary and I went to a Jesus Seminar on the Road in Wichita last year that was all about this new scholarship on Marcion.

Marcion was the leader of a branch of Christianity in Rome in the early to mid second century. Marcion was Greek; he rejected any Jewish influence on Jesus. Marcion believed that the God of the Old Testament who created the material world was an inferior God, a demiurge, a jealous God who was a tribal deity of the Jews. The demiurge punished people who sinned through suffering and death. This God was legalistic and warlike. The true God is a universal God of love and compassion. This is the God made known through Jesus. Marcion was docetic--he believed that Jesus only seemed to have a material body; he really had a spiritual body. Marcion denied that Jesus had a material birth, death and resurrection.

Marcion compiled the first Christian canon, which consisted of an edited version of the Gospel of Luke and several of Paul's letters.

Scholars like Tyson and Pervo believe that an original version of Luke began circulating around 90 CE, and that Luke revised the gospel 30 years later and gave it final form as a response to Marcion. Luke added the birth story and the resurrection appearances to show that Jesus was truly human. Luke emphasized that Jesus was the fulfillment of Jewish Scripture, not a replacement.

Luke responds to Marcion in today's text by showing that Jesus cared about the people of Israel and lamented the destruction of the Temple. Luke even shows some Pharisees as trying to help Jesus.

Marcion was declared a heretic by the early church, the first Christian heretic. Unfortunately, Christian orthodoxy over the centuries reflected Marcion's hostility for the Jews rather than Luke's compassion.

Second Move: The Lament for Oklahoma

Many people today who fancy themselves prophets are just shrill voices. They show no compassion for people they disagree with; they try to shame them. They are not interested in repentance; they want victory for their side and humiliation for their opponents. The true prophet brings truth to the people and encourages them to repent.

Lent is a time for repentance, a time to recognize that we have turned from God. We need to reorient ourselves. Get our bearings straight. Turn back to God.

It's not just personal repentance. It is repentance at both the personal level and the group level. We as individuals need to repent. We as a church need to repent. We as a people need to repent.

I have been studying the partisan divide. How is it that we have turned into red states and blue states? How did we come to have two completely different understandings of reality? How can we heal these divisions? How do we repent and turn toward each other?

Historians point out that the United States has always had regional cultures. David Hackett Fischer describes how the American colonies were originally settled by people from four different regions of England and that they brought their regional culture from England with them. American colonists in Massachusetts were Puritans—they came from East Anglia, part of eastern England. Virginia was settled by Royalists from southern England. Pennsylvania was settled by Quakers and Mennonites from the highlands in northern England. Appalachia was settled by Scots-Irish from Scotland and northern Ireland. These settlers established the dominant culture in their regions and these cultures have persisted to the present-day.

As people from these regions moved west across the American continent, they took their culture with them. Puritans populated the northern tier in the Midwest: Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota. Quakers and Mennonites spread across the middle parts of the Midwest and Great Plains. Virginians expanded into the rest of the South. Appalachians moved into Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma.

As immigrants moved into these regions, they were assimilated into the regional culture. If you are doing the genealogy of your family, what is more important than the country of origin for your ancestors is what part of the United States they lived in. A good example of this is John F. Kennedy, an Irish Catholic, whose family was assimilated into a Puritan culture.

Oklahoma still has a predominately Scots-Irish culture. The Scots-Irish lived in border areas and had to fight for survival and repulse several invasions by English kings over the centuries. They were herders because they had poor farmland. They had to defend their herds against predators. Violence is part of their culture. The Scots-Irish in America have been the greatest supporters of American wars. They have had the greatest percentage of their people serve in the military. They are sensitive to honor and shame and respond violently to what are perceived to be attacks on their honor. They have higher rates of gun ownership. They believe that criminal offenders should receive harsh sentences. They see part of their honor as protecting women. They believe in traditional gender roles. They place a lower value on education than other regions. They are strict Calvinists who read the Bible literally.

We see all these values embodied in Oklahoma today. Oklahoma leads the nation in mass incarceration and is last in the nation in teacher pay. Evangelical churches far outnumber mainline churches.

Jesus cried, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem.” Today we could be crying, “Oklahoma, Oklahoma.” The prophets love, support and defend their people. One of the ways they show that love is to point out how the people and their leaders have fallen short. They bring a word of prophecy out of hope. They hope that their people will repent and turn to God.

The reform effort is more difficult in Oklahoma because we are trying to change the culture. Just because the roots of the culture were grown in violent soil doesn't mean that it must always produce violent fruit. But it will take time. And it will require patience. We will need to work the soil.

The culture is not all bad. Hospitality and loyalty are part of that culture. Oklahomans are friendlier than people from other regions. During the Dust Bowl, 75% of Oklahomans stayed; they didn't give up hope and leave after years without any harvests.

Most of my ancestors come out of the Pennsylvania culture. They spread into Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, northern Missouri and Kansas. I come by my non-violence honestly. Most of my ancestors are from a Quaker and Mennonite culture.

I would suspect that many of your ancestors also come from a Quaker or Puritan culture. That may be why you are here. We are quicker to recognize the contrast in values that we see embodied in the Oklahoma culture.

Many Disciples churches have been declining in membership. Disciples historically were strongest in the same areas as my ancestors were from. The center of Disciples thought at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century was the University of Chicago, which was influenced by Quaker and Mennonite culture. The intellectual center for Churches of Christ was Nashville, which was Scots-Irish. Disciples seminaries in the last century had professors and students that were brought up in the Chicago school.

There are cultural forces at work in the decline of our membership. It is not that we have been unfaithful. It is not that the majority of people in Oklahoma are stupid or mean. We are from different cultures.

Our goal is not to grow the church, it is help people find deeper connections with God and with other people. Many of us have lived in Oklahoma for most or all of our lives. We care deeply about Oklahomans; otherwise we would have left a long time ago. We care especially for the people who are treated as something less than. We grieve that people are hindered from realizing their full humanity. Quakers are

known for their tolerance. They were the first culture in America to recognize that all people are children of God.

We want to tear down the walls of our prisons and help people reenter society. We want to improve the quality of schools for all our children and pay teachers a rate that reflects the true value of educating our children. We want to eliminate a view of gender that justifies lower pay for women and fewer women in leadership and that stigmatizes LGBT folks. We want Oklahoma to repent.

Conclusion

The parable of the leaven finds its original form in the Gospel of Thomas 96. This is Stephen Patterson's translation:

The kingdom of the Father is like a woman.
She took a little bit of yeast. She hid it in dough and made
it into huge loaves of bread.
Whoever has ears should hear.

This was Brandon Scott's favorite parable. The kingdom of God is a woman, and she is working leaven, something that is unclean, into the dough. The kingdom of God is filled with something unclean, like the mustard seed that Joanna Dewey was talking about last week that grows into a giant weed.

We can only hope that we will be like leaven, working our way into the culture of Oklahoma.

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