

Taking Delight in Others
A Sermon on Luke 13:1-9
Third Sunday in Lent
March 24, 2019

Introduction

One of the things that turns people off about church is religious language, words like repentance and grace.

Repentance brings up images of John the Baptist, a wild man preaching in the wilderness.

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. . . . Even now the ax is lying at the root of the tree; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [Luke 3:7-9]

John is scaring people into getting religion now before it's too late. You don't want to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Grace has been corrupted, too, by Christian tradition, especially extreme Calvinists. The popular perception of grace is that we deserve to die for our sins but we are saved when we turn to Christ. We're just wretched sinners. Grace gets us to heaven instead of letting us go to hell where we belong.

Today we will try to rehabilitate repentance and grace.

First Move: Empty Lives

Our text today falls into two parts. Luke combines two stories about people whose lives were tragically cut short with a parable about a fig tree that is about to be cut down. Neither the stories nor the parable appear in any other gospels. Historical Jesus scholars believe that the two stories about people perishing come from the hand of Luke and that the parable of the fig tree comes from Jesus.

The message that Luke seems to be sending by combining the stories and the parable is, "Repent, for your time is short."

Jesus has been teaching the crowds while on the road to Jerusalem. Some of them report that Pilate killed some Galileans while they were slaughtering lambs in the Temple during Passover. The crowd probably expected Jesus to condemn Pilate and to express sympathy for the innocent Galileans who had been murdered while they were offering sacrifices.

Jesus surprises them. He says, “No, I tell you, unless you have a change of heart, or repent, you also will perish.”

The Greek word for *perish* is ἀπόλλυμι. To perish has a subtler meaning than simply to die. It carries the sense of premature death, of being cut short, sometimes violently and unexpectedly. We buy perishables at the grocery store, food that needs to be kept frozen or refrigerated or it will spoil. Milk will go bad if you leave it sitting on the kitchen counter overnight. Milk perishes. Its life is cut short.

ἀπόλλυμι has a secondary meaning of being lost. It means perish in today’s text. Next week, when Mary preaches on the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it means lost. When we perish, we are lost to God. We lose our usefulness to God.

Jesus tells the crowd about another group of people who perished. Eighteen people in Jerusalem were killed when a tower on the Temple wall fell on them. These people were victims of chance.

Jesus uses them as an example. “Do you believe that they were worse sinners than any other people living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you also will perish.”

Death was always so close in the first century. The average person only lived to be 30 years old. The number of people who died violently, either by war or by murder, was 60 to 100 times higher than in Western societies today. Dying violently at the hands of another human being was a real threat then instead of the remote possibility that it is today. People died from diseases that are treatable today. How many of you have had your appendix removed? You probably would have died of a ruptured appendix in Biblical times.

Jesus sees the tragedy of a short life as a given. Whether by sword or by chance, their lives were likely to be cut short. It could happen while you were at the Temple offering sacrifices. It could happen while you are standing next to a wall. When it happens so suddenly, there is no chance to repent. You die and you can no longer be useful to God.

We don’t have to see God as a God of judgment that we are trying to please. We are born with a desire to lead meaningful lives. Turning to God is reaching beyond ourselves. It gives our lives meaning. We are doing things that matter. Our lives make a difference in other people’s lives.

Erik Erikson, the premier psychologist on human development, calls this desire generativity. Adults have the urge and the need to generate and nurture our offspring and younger generations. We want to make the world a better place for our children and for the next generation. We want to teach our children how to make their way in the world and we want to make the world a safer place for our children.

When we mature as adults, our circle of care expands beyond ourselves and our children to include the next generation.

This instinct is not purely altruistic. We need to be needed. It gives us great satisfaction to know that we have helped others and that they appreciate our guidance and support. Erikson says, “Mature man needs to be needed, and maturity needs guidance as well as encouragement from what has been produced and must be taken care of.”

If adults are immature, or if they feel that they are rejected by their children or the younger generation when they try to nurture them, they experience stagnation instead of generativity. They retreat into themselves. They become totally self absorbed in their pleasures or in their work. Generativity is an expansion of our personal interests; stagnation is a contraction.

Jesus says, repent or perish. Your life will be empty unless you turn to God. Instead of repent or perish, Erikson would say, extend your circle of care instead of contracting it.

Turning to God and extending your circle of care mean turning to other people. Loving God means loving your neighbor because your neighbor is a child of God, just like you are.

Second Move: A Gardener Full of Grace

In the last part of today’s text, Jesus tells the crowd a parable about a barren fig tree. The topic turns from repentance to grace.

Fig trees in the Old Testament are part of the Promised Land, the land of milk and honey. Moses tells the Israelites in Deuteronomy 8:7-8: “For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing forth in hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates.” A fig tree is the only tree mentioned by name in the Garden of Eden, the only tree in paradise. Adam and Eve cover themselves with fig leaves. The prophet Micah talks of a time of God’s justice, when every man shall sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree.

In the parable, a man has a vineyard. He plants a fig tree and comes to it for three years, checking for fruit. He decides to cut it down. It is just wasting the soil. It is taking up valuable space in his vineyard.

The gardener, who is one of the man’s servants, says, “Master, leave it alone another year. Let me dig around it and throw manure on it. If it produces fruit, well and good. If not, you can cut it down.”

Jesus' audience would have laughed at that. Fig trees were sometimes seen as symbols for the religious and political leaders of Israel. They would have been amused by the image of throwing manure on their leaders.

The tradition often reads the parables allegorically. In allegory, people and things are symbols for something else. A common reading in the tradition is to interpret God as the owner of the vineyard, Jesus as the gardener, and the fig tree as an unrepentant Christian. God wants to destroy the Christian, but Jesus pleads for mercy. Grace comes because of Jesus.

This is also a parable about the lost. Justo Gonzalez, a liberation theologian and church historian, asks us to imagine what a vineyard looks like after all the figs have been harvested. All the trees that produce fruit would have been severely pruned. The fig tree with no fruit has never been pruned. It would be green and leafy, standing in the midst of dry and gnarled stumps. Now it receives even better treatment. The gardener will dig around it and shower it with manure. The fig tree is getting special treatment, while the trees that bear fruit get nothing.

Historical Jesus scholars believe that Jesus did not intend for his parables to be read allegorically. They were stories about everyday life. They were intended to puzzle us. Jesus would want his listeners to ask themselves, "Why would the gardener want to give the fig tree another chance. It has already proven that it is barren."

The gardener does not have to represent Jesus. He could just be a gardener. Is the gardener foolish or full of grace? The gardener is a model of grace. The point of the story may be that ordinary people in our daily lives show us grace.

Third Move: The Joy in Grace

The Greek word for grace is χάρις. It has the same root as the Greek word for joy, which is χαίρω. Χάρις in secular Greek is an attitude we have toward something that delights us. It also means goodwill. Grace is when you show concern for someone else's welfare and do something for them without expecting anything in return.

I went through the drive-through window at McDonald's Friday morning. The cashier told me that the person in the car in front of me had already paid for my breakfast. I couldn't see who was in the car. It was a Corvette. I don't know anyone who drives a Corvette. Some people call that paying it forward. You also could call it grace.

Martin Marty, a church historian, says that grace is an expression of the character of God. It is a summary of the basic Christian attitude toward life. It is unconditional positive regard for all people, including our enemies.

Luke does not use the word χάρις in the parable of the fig tree. He doesn't have to. It runs all through it.

Luke does use χάρις in the Sermon on the Plain. He says, "If you love the ones who love you, what grace is that to you? For even sinners love the ones who love them. . . ." [Luke 6:32]. Don't act out of an expectation of reciprocity. That was the norm in the first century. Everyone acted out of reciprocity. Do things with an expectation of receiving something in return. Jesus says, "No, be compassionate as your father is compassionate" [Luke 6:36].

Grace is acting out of joy instead of acting out of gain. We see beauty in the other person and it moves us to act. Every Christmas Mary and I watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Charlie Brown picks the scrawniest tree in the lot. The other kids laugh at him for being a blockhead. Charlie Brown sees something in that tree. He sees the beauty in the scrawny tree, just as the gardener can see the beauty in the barren fig tree. When all the kids decorate the scrawny tree, everyone else can see the beauty, too.

God takes delight in us at our baptism. We resist grace. We think we are unworthy. The good news is that each of us is a beloved child of God. God accepts us, just as we are.

We will take delight in every person we meet if we look at them as God sees them. Mystics are able to do that.

That is a tall order for the rest of us. How do we take delight in our enemies? How do we take delight in strangers? Take delight in what is unique about that person.

Many adults don't want to be around children, especially other people's children. Mary teaches pre-school because she takes delight in the children. I am not going to say that she takes delight in every one of them, but most of them. They make her laugh.

Do you see the image of God in other people? The hard part is taking the time and caring enough to actually get to know them. I talk to Julius Jones on the telephone two to three times a week. He is in solitary confinement on death row. I am afraid that he is perishing—his life will be prematurely cut short before he has a chance to do all he can to be useful to God. Julius is eager to talk to people. He keeps up on things. He reads books. He has a small television in his cell. He watches news and sports. He is not the monster that the district attorneys made him out to be. He is sensitive, caring and thoughtful. He cares about me. He wants to know what is happening with me. He wants to talk about what is going on in my world.

Through the New Beginnings process we are trying to reach out to the neighborhood. Find a mission that will connect us with the neighborhood. That means taking the time to get to know a new group of people.

We will be expanding the Easter Egg Hunt next month to include special needs children. We will be inviting children from Special Care and Wings. We will set up a couple of Bocce ball fields. Hopefully that will resonate with families of special needs children as something they can do. We will have a chance to take delight in special-needs children.

Conclusion

Repentance and grace are religious words worth saving. They express ideas that are central to Christianity, and they go together. Turn to God because God delights in you.

As we advance on our faith journey, we will be filled with grace. We will find joy in unexpected people and unexpected places. And the grace will pour out of us.

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