

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

March 7, 2010  
*3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent*  
Luke 13:1-9

### **True Humility and Repentance take Practice**

Recently I was at a meeting where the new president of Montana State University, Waded Cruzado, was the guest speaker. As she has been doing since she became the 12<sup>th</sup> president of MSU in January, she used her address as an opportunity to introduce herself and to share her vision for the university. She did this by using her autobiography as an outline for why the mission of MSU and the other land grant universities across the nation is so important in bringing higher education to so many who otherwise may not have such an opportunity for educational advancement. She went on to extol the merit of the role of the land grant universities—a theme for which she has become known already in her brief tenure. As she spoke with impressive passion in greater detail about the land grant mission with its emphasis on agriculture, engineering, the sciences and research with the underpinnings of the liberal arts I was struck again, as a graduate of MSU myself, of the contribution that schools like this have made to the way in which we view the world—particularly the cause and effect nature that is at the heart of so much of our understanding. Whether it be in agriculture where the effects of nutrition and health of livestock and plants are studied, or the logic that goes into the calculations of structural integrity at the macro level in bridges and buildings or at the molecular level in chemistry and physics, or the algorithms that are at the heart of mathematics and computer science or the study of the philosophy of logic itself, so much of what is taught and learned is about how to explain and predict outcomes. If we know the factors that consistently result in a particular outcome, the world around us becomes less uncertain and much more manageable. Such knowledge can give us confidence as we make our way through our life in the world. Dr. Cruzado's presentation was a helpful reminder of how the university helps us to better understand the world in which we live.

Within in the last month though we have been reminded of the limits of our understanding as we have witnessed not just one, but now two massive earthquakes that have caused billions of dollars in damage, taking the lives of tens of thousands and leaving survivors in a miserable state of affairs in both Haiti and Chile. The limits in our understanding are both in our inability to accurately predict when and where massive earthquakes will strike, and then more profoundly in trying to understand the human suffering that results. While scientific researchers continue to pursue a deeper understanding of the seismic forces within the planet with the hope that someday a specific earthquake forecasting method will be developed, we are still left to ponder the more existential question of trying to understand why such large scale suffering is brought upon a particular people—the Haitians and the Chileans most recently. We desperately want to understand and some will grasp onto attempts to explain even when they fly in the face of reason. In the case of the earthquakes in Haiti we have the shameful example of televangelist Pat Robertson suggesting that Haitians brought this affliction upon themselves as a punishment from God for their devotion to religions other than Christianity. This was not the first time that Robertson has caused embarrassment for Christians who seek to square the loving and gracious God they know with such bad theology.

When we read the Scriptures we're reminded that this struggle to understand why bad things happen to good people has been around for a long, long time. In fact we just heard of one such example in the encounter Jesus had with some questioners one day. These questioners came to Jesus with a contemporary situation in which some worshipers in the temple had been killed by Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus perceives that they are suggesting that those worshipers somehow must have deserved this terrible death. So Jesus asks them, "Do you think because the Galileans suffered in this way [that is killed in the temple while worshiping] they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" (Lk. 13:2) Jesus has picked up on their attempts to understand and explain away this terrible event. They desperately want to hold on to the assertion that bad things happen to bad people. Because if they can affirm this cause and effect logic as true, they can then in turn take comfort and solace in the flip side of this logic—namely that if bad things happen to bad people, then bad things don't or won't or even can't happen to good people. It's an assertion to which we are tempted to cling—especially if we are convinced of our own goodness or at least of our relative reduced level of sinfulness when compared to that of others. Oh how we want to believe that our destiny is in our own hands—that if I live a good life with as little sin as I can manage I will earn, amass or garner enough good points or hash marks to protect myself from suffering in this life or damnation in the next.

This way of thinking breaks down though as soon as we ourselves experience pain, tragedy or crisis or when it happens to someone we know and care about—a family member or friend or someone we know by all accounts to have lived life as best as they could. It breaks down when we must conclude that something must have been done to bring on this punishment or it breaks down when we cry out at how unfair it is that this suffering is undeserved. Another way that the full extent of this way of thinking comes home to roost is when the statement is made that God must have had a reason for this tragedy. At best this assertion is left with God's reason being a mystery, and at worst when someone suggests he knows why and declares it to the world.

Well Jesus will have nothing to do with this theology or way of thinking. The question he asks about those worshipers who were killed by Pilate is a rhetorical one. "Do you think because the Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you;" Jesus goes on to say, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." (Lk. 13:2-5) In his response Jesus is making it clear that sometimes bad things happen to people simply because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whether it's those who die by the unjust sentence of a corrupt Roman governor or when a poorly constructed tower in Jerusalem collapses with 18 victims killed in the rubble, the deaths are not the result of the level of sinfulness that was in the dead. In Jesus' response to his questioners, he is pulling them down from their arrogant assumptions about their relative goodness and calling for a healthy dose of humility.

Jesus then goes on to talk about the repentance that God desires in us. This word repentance that Jesus uses is a powerful one that means a complete reorientation of one's life. It literally means to turn around—to do a 180, to make a U-turn. He's not calling for a minor course correction to get back on track after drifting from it. He is rather

emphasizing that to follow in the way God intends for us requires that we have a complete change of orientation and trajectory. To summarize what this change of orientation means is to look at who is in the driver's seat of your life. And the 180-degree change calls for each of us to get out of that driver's seat and to put our complete trust in the one who takes our place at the wheel—namely Jesus himself. It's another call for a humility that leads to a deep and profound trust in God's care and keeping in which God goes with us through all the ups and downs of our lives.

Jesus goes on and tells the parable of the barren fig tree to drive home the point of God's amazing and expansive grace that is discovered by those who do this U-turn and repent. When the owner of the vineyard comes across a fig tree that has borne no fruit for three years and calls for the gardener to cut it down, the gardener pleads on behalf of the tree that it be given one more season to produce, with the promise that with the proper attention and fertilization it will indeed bear fruit and in the event it doesn't then it can be cut down. As Jesus is calling for a radical repentance that requires a profound humility, he is at the same time assuring the same that God's grace is sufficient, providing the opportunity for repentance to take root.

My friends, in this Lenten season we're focusing on the journey that Jesus took to Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there. This year we're emphasizing the practical ways that we can embrace that journey as we too make our way toward God's way. We're suggesting some specific practices that will strengthen us on that journey. In the last two weeks we've called for practicing obedience to God alone on this journey, and to practice steadfastness and tenacity. Today humility and repentance are the practices to which we are called as well. Humility in accepting God as the source of all grace and mercy that is not tied to goodness or sinfulness, but rather is connected to repentance as our lives are reoriented to go not in our way but in God's way.

Rodney Clapp, an evangelical Christian, who is a keen observer and critic of the contemporary church writes,

“We live in a day—not so unlike that of the atrocity-rumoring Galileans—when everyone wants to blame everyone else for the ills of the world. Christians blame Muslims and Muslims blame Christians. Fundamentalists blame Hollywood, the ACLU and homosexuals. Liberals blame fundamentalists, militarists, and pharmaceutical companies. Amid the din, Jesus says, ‘Hold on. Think about a homely old fig tree. One that has not borne much fruit for a long time.’ . . . Jesus knocks us off our moral high horses. He brings us down to earth and back to ourselves, with talk of fertilizer [manure] and a scruffy tree. He says, ‘Ask yourself if you are like that fig tree. Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space?’” (*Feasting on the Word; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Vol. 2*, David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, general editors, 2009, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 96)

May we be so humbled by these words of Jesus as those Galileans as we consider again Jesus' call to repentance in our Lenten and life journey. In humility we will discover

that God is with us every step of the way, when bad things happen to good and bad people, when God's people are unjustly killed, and when people die in tragic accidents, human-caused as well as in natural disasters.

There's a Spanish song in our hymnbook that speaks of this accompanying love of God that journeys with us through it all. And with the words of its second stanza I close:

When at last all those who suffer find their comfort,  
When they hope though even hope seems hopelessness,  
When we love though hate at times seems all around us,  
Then we know that God still goes that road with us,  
Then we know that God still goes that road with us.

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