

Sunday, March 11, 2007

Isaiah 55:1-9

Ho, 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 labour 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.

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. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; 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.'

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

Sermon: When Good Things Happen to Bad People

I'm sure many of you know the best selling book written twenty-five years ago by Rabbi Harold Kushner – When Bad Things Happen to Good People. It was the illness of his son that prompted the Rabbi to write; He has said he wrote the book for people whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold on to their faith and be comforted by religion and for those whose love of God led them to blame themselves for their suffering and persuade themselves that they deserved it.

There is an echo of such issues in the opening of the Gospel lesson today – Jesus reflecting on some tragic deaths that were very much on everyone's mind. He says, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than

all other Galileans? “No,” he answers himself – “but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.”

Then he offers a parable about a garden, a landowner, a gardener, and a fig tree. The fig tree is not fruitful, and the landowner wants it cut down. But the gardener says: "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

I wonder if we hear in these words a message that is menacing or a message full of mercy? I wonder if in looking out at the world we see an environment that is threatening or one that is abundant in kindness? I wonder if when we think of God we envision a landlord God ready to close accounts and cut down or a gardener God who is asking for just a little more time to let the world come around, become what it was created to be, to grow in new ways and bear the fruit of righteousness and mercy.

There is a sense in the Bible, and in many religious traditions, that what goes around comes around – sort of a natural justice that brings recompense in like kind. There is also a sense of the fallen state of humankind – that there is enough selfishness, thoughtlessness, violence and cruelty in the world to bring destruction upon everyone.

Think of how easy it is to damage or destroy compared to healing and building up. How much time and talent does it take a couple of hooligans with cans of spray paint to spread ugliness across the front of a church. How much time and talent does it take for a suicide bomber to walk into a market and forever upend the lives of families and even the fate of nations.

There is a sense in the Bible that God, in mercy, holds back the natural consequence of human sin, much like a dam can hold back a mighty river. What goes around comes around, but not yet. But this weight of consequence, this force that the Bible calls guilt, is very real and very much an account that someday must be paid. In mercy, God reminds us of this reality – in mercy, God pays the account on the cross.

Last week I used an illustration from a book I've been reading about a young Irishman who makes his way to America on a sailing ship. I'd like to use another illustration from that book this week. The Irish who were fleeing the famine at home had to make their way to England in order to board a ship for Canada or America. In this story the ship leaves from Liverpool, and after some difficulties and their first burial at sea, a sailor high up in the ships rigging calls out “Land ho!”

The immigrants stream for the ship's railing to get their first glimpse of America – they begin to cheer and hug one another with tears. The experienced sailors quiet them quickly – That's not America – that's only Ireland, old Cape Clear.

The voyage is not over, in fact it has hardly begun. The people on the water for the first time have no concept of the enormity of the sea, no sense of the miles and miles of open

ocean they have to cross - no point of reference for the distance between Liverpool and Quebec.

So it is with our sense of God's mercy – mercy towards us and mercy toward others. There's a wideness in God's mercy,  
Like the wideness of the sea;

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Listen, God is not out to make anyone suffer, nor to condemn, nor to punish. God is a patient gardener, not quick to cut down and throw into the fire – those are human notions, limits of the human mind projected onto God.

The Good News in Christ is that God works to give yet another chance - to till the soil, to prune the plant, to get the new growth going. God wants each and every life to bear some fruit of righteousness, and not matter what we've done, what mistakes, wrong turns, and shortcomings any of us might think have cursed our life, God invites us to repent, believe the Good News, take a different direction, and receive the blessing of new life in Christ.

Forgive our trespasses, we say in the Lord's Prayer, as we forgive those who trespass against us. That to me is a frightful line, for I know I do not possess the mercy of God. I don't want to see bad things happen to good people, but I also don't want to see good things happen to bad people. Like the laborer who has worked from early morning in the vineyard, I don't want to see those fellows who came in late in the afternoon get the same pay. Like the older brother, I don't want to see my father throw a party for his other son who has squandered all his money in a foreign land and comes home penniless and pitiful.

Let them get what they deserve – and no more - that's what my natural mind goes to every time. Like the immigrants mistaking their old home in Ireland for their desired destination in America, it's very hard to understand how far it is we still have to travel. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

In this season of Lent let us give some thought to the parable of the unfruitful tree and ponder the mercy of God, mercy wide as the sea, mercy high as the heavens. Let us ponder and give thanks that God's Spirit is tending us still so that our lives might bear the joyful fruits of righteousness and mercy.