

Facing Ourselves

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St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, March 24, 2019

Lectionary text: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

☞ “Ho, everyone who’s thirsty, come get some water!” ☞ It was the familiar call of water-sellers in the streets. “I’m here. Come buy water from me!”

But wait. The song is changed. “You who have *no money*, come buy without price! Get water and wine and bread for free. Eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Enjoy!”

Now just hold on a minute! We’re in Lent. Fat Tuesday, Mardi Gras, is supposed to be the day *before* the long Lenten fast, no? Yet here it is, right in the lectionary, smack dab in the middle of Lent. “Why do you spend money for what you don’t need?” You can have life and have it abundantly – the Realm of God. And this abundance is not just for a chosen few. It’s for *everybody*, for *all the nations*. The prophet Isaiah was changing the tune – and the rules.

And Jesus was always going around feeding people. He provided 150 gallons of good wine for a wedding party and just gave it away. He fed thousands of people in the countryside with no cover charge. He ate with sinners, and even with those who believed that they weren’t sinners. Breaking bread was the very last, tender thing that Jesus did with his beloved friends.

This joyful message is also reflected in Luke 12, leading up to today’s lesson: Don’t worry about your life, what you’re going to eat or wear. Don’t be afraid. God already knows what you need, and is pleased to give it to you. Don’t be like the rich fool who kept on building bigger barns to store all his stuff. Life is not about having a lot of possessions.

And so we come to Luke 13 in today’s lectionary. As background, it was commonly assumed that if you were wealthy, it was because you deserved it, you were living faithfully and God therefore blessed you with riches. And if calamity befell you – if you were poor or sick or disabled, it was your own fault, because you deserved it on account of your sins, or maybe the sins of your ancestors. If your life is good, it’s evidence that *you* are good. If your life is bad, it’s evidence that *you* are bad. Two thousand years later we still haven’t shaken this belief.

Rabbi Kushner had to write a whole book about why bad things even happen to good people.

“No!” Jesus said, “that’s not the way it is. Do you think that those who die by murder or accident are worse sinners than everyone else?” And we know that he’s right. Terrible things really do happen to good people all the time, and truly terrible people can be the bearers of riches and power. It’s not that we all get what we deserve. I have a friend in A.A. who says gratefully, “*Thank God* we don’t get what we deserve!” That’s not the way it is.

So what *is* important, then? Jesus puts it in one word: “Repent.” According to Mark’s gospel, that was also the very first thing that Jesus said in his ministry: “The time is here. The Realm of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

Now, somehow we’ve managed to change that good news into a dire warning about needing fire insurance. A common conception of repentance is to feel guilty about what you did, admit it, and then resolve never to do it again. In this view, you are saved by *believing and saying* the right things. But according to Jesus, believing the good news comes *after* repentance. “Repent, and believe the good news.” It is only then that we can see clearly.

I do think that we have this basically right in our confessional liturgy. There is no repentance without taking a hard, honest look at ourselves, especially those shadowy places in us that we prefer not to see. In worship we allow a very brief time of silence for this reflective process, and then we move on to believing the good news. It’s not that through our silent confession we somehow *earn* God’s love. It was already there in the beginning.

There’s a peculiar idea around that if you can just make people feel *bad* enough about themselves, then they will change – if they can just feel guilty, ashamed, humiliated, worthless, and terrible enough, then salvation may happen. It’s not true. There never was any good behavioral science behind it. If anything, when we feel worthless and unacceptable, it is almost *impossible* to change. It’s paralyzing and a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, it is when we experience being deeply accepted and acceptable *as we are right now* that it becomes possible to change. This liberating acceptance might come from a friend, a counselor, a parent, a teacher, or from God. It’s not that God accepts us because we change; rather we can change *because* we are accepted. That’s grace. I don’t know why we’re wired that way, but it’s true.

Repenting is not as simple as just believing or feeling or doing something. A pretty good translation of *metanoia* – the Greek word rendered as “repent” – is a change in heart and mind, in your way of life. Jesus did not teach a set of doctrines, but a way of life, a way of being. For some folks *metanoia* really does happen in a sudden transformative experience, like the story of Saul or Ebenezer Scrooge. For most of us, though, it’s a gradual lifelong journey of two steps forward and one step back, always keeping our eyes on the horizon, on the Jesus values of lovingkindness; of nonviolence, forgiveness, inclusion, and simplicity.

And let’s be freed of the belief that we need to, or ever *could* earn God’s love. Even most human parents are better than that: they don’t make their children *earn* their love. *Salvation* is from the same Latin word as *salve*. It means to be healed, to be whole. “Your faith has made you whole, healed, well.” If God’s very nature is Love, a lovingkindness deeper than we can even understand, more loving than the very best human parents we could ever imagine, then how is it conceivable that 99.9% of God’s own children could be hellishly tortured forever? It just doesn’t work. It’s Dante, not Jesus.

Then there’s that business in Luke 13 about bearing fruit. We are expected to bear fruit, and it’s *vital*. Like fig trees, it’s just part of who we are meant to be. Being fruitful does sometimes mean getting surrounded by manure, but it’s our reason for existence. What kind of fruit are you prepared to bear?

The really good news here is that we don’t have to do all of this on our own, to lift ourselves up by our shoelaces. God is the patient gardener who can help us to repent, to have a new mind and heart and way of life. I think it has to do with our willingness, with being open to the presence and action of God in our lives.

So what’s the bottom line in three points?

1. The path to healing and wholeness is a loving *way of life* that Jesus showed and taught.
2. We are expected to bear fruit, and don’t have to do it on our own.
3. God loves us, *all* of us, deeply and forever.

So come, *everyone* – every woman, man, and child. Repent and believe! Enter the Realm of God without the price of admission. Receive the water of baptism, the wine and bread of communion, without price, without regard to merit. Welcome to the banquet, and bring fruit!