

Lent 3 - March 7, 2010

The Rev. Graham Bland

They must have done something really bad!? Those Galileans Pilate killed? Or the ones the tower fell on? They must have disturbed the order of things and it needed to be restored? Right?

[This was also the logic of the terrorists who brought down the towers in New York City.]

The questions they posed to Jesus back then echo still in our modern consciousness. Religious faith or not, many quietly believe that there is a price to be paid for our misdoings, a judgment to be made, a reckoning and balancing of the ledger. We ask, when we feel unjustly judged: “What did I do to deserve this ...?” Or, when we think the punishment fair: “I must be suffering now for what I did, way back when ...”

Jesus categorically denies this way of thinking: “No, I tell you.”

Jesus’ does call us to make a choice, though, to choose life now, to believe now in God’s mercy and open our hearts to God’s grace ... “but unless you repent you will all perish as they did”. If I choose not to turn to God, I may perish by thinking I am unloved and unlovable. It is that isolation and separation from community that is the source of humankind’s greatest suffering and sorrow. Not surprisingly then, most of the healings reported in the New Testament are also about a person being restored to community.

The Good News of Jesus is about living fully and humanly now. It must not be interpreted as a call to live in fear. God calls us to love not to fear.

How then will we think about today’s parable of the Fig Tree? Most common is to assume the tree is a human life. That sounds like ‘unfruitful’ lives will be cut down. But who can judge any human life unfruitful? God sees fit to love each one of us completely and equally as we are.

Perhaps, rather, the unfruitful fig tree is a path we have chosen that seems to be bearing little fruit? Or, perhaps it is a project we have begun that is yielding little?

Now, the Gospel brings encouragement as Jesus intended ... No, let’s not give up on this yet; give it a little more time ... and then if it’s still not bearing fruit, of course we must let go and move on.

Jesus calls us into meaning, into life, and not fear.

Who among us does not suffer over the way our lives are unfolding? It is a rare human soul that does not agonize over past and present faults and desire to correct them and live “a better life”. St Paul said of all human beings: “what the law requires is written on their hearts.” (Ro 2) In other words, all human beings, made in God’s image, are guided by their already God-given conscience. The ways of God are written into nature, into our nature.

Yet the way of mercy and forgiveness Jesus represents comes to us with difficulty. We can get stuck in a kind of commercial, transactional way of relating to God.

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A disciple of Rabbi Elimelech asked how one should pray for forgiveness. He told him to observe the innkeeper before Yom Kippur. The disciple stayed at the inn and watched for several days but could see nothing relevant.

On the night before Yom Kippur, the innkeeper opened two large ledgers. From one book he read off a list of all his sins from the past year. From the second book he recited all the bad things that had occurred to him during the past year.

Then, he lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed, “Dear G_d, it is true I have sinned against You. But You have done many distressful things to me too.

We are now beginning a new year. So let’s wipe the slate clean. I’ll forgive You, and You forgive me.”

At least, he presumed that God’s mercy is stronger than God’s judgment. That’s progress, no!?

What is the help we need to heal this torment in us?

From Isaiah today, we heard: “Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters [None are excluded here – God’s welcome is for all]; And you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk Without money and without cost. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, And your wages for what does not satisfy?”

We have all suffered from the sense of our own unworthiness. So we all know the longing that Isaiah and the Psalmist call ‘thirst’. It is that powerful desire in all of us to be loved and accepted. It is stronger even than the dryness that yearns to take a draught of water or a cold one after labouring on a summer day.

All humans thirst for this mercy and meaning. None of us escape it, whoever we are. We suffer the consequences of our own brokenness and desire mercy, and we also want our lives to matter, to have meaning and purpose. Maybe we suffer most when we feel our lives lack meaning?

One of my students said to me recently: “The most important thing for me is not to waste my life. I want my life to have meaning, to count for something.”

Poet Mary Oliver writes of this call:

“When it is over, I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real. I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.”

That can only happen when we choose to turn to God, and come to the living waters of God's grace where our thirst can be slaked and a new vision for life begin. The Gospel calls for this kind of choice ... The choice for a deep relationship with God, in whom we find mercy when we get lost in parched wildernesses of self-punishment and isolation.

And I have found God's living water most of all in relationships and in community, where I can be known, loved and forgiven. In true community, I am seen and accepted for who I am, I can relax and be at peace there, become myself, be healed.

And when we make a choice for God and community, new life creeps in as we nourish our lives and one another with fresh living water.

We are brothers and sisters in this common longing for God. There is no shame for us in admitting this. It is a need that unites us all.

And as our mission at St. James' turns more and more on the realization (or awareness) of our common humanity ... so we will move ever closer to the realization (the making real) of our common humanity through our service to one another.

Before everything else, our work is to offer to one another, and to be ready to receive from one another, the living water that is God. How? As much as it is possible for us, by extending mercy and forgiveness and kindness to one another, by noticing each other and appreciating one another's gifts.

Mary Oliver echoes today's Gospel call, in another poem *The Summer Day*:

“Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

I must consider, perhaps, is there someone I need to forgive today, or whose forgiveness I need? Is there some matter or person that needs my attention?

Let us believe in the supreme value each of our lives can bring to the other.

L'Arche is a community here in London where vulnerable developmentally disabled adults are included and surrounded in a network of loving relationships. Lately, I have been getting to know these folks in the Faith and Light community. I am learning so much from them about the value of our lives, about the gift of living simply as I am.

On the scale of the wider human community, some of you are going to Peru. I am keen to hear upon your return of all that God is doing in Peru and of how we as a church in Canada can learn from people there and from our friendship with them.

For where people are poor or vulnerable (which is all of us some of the time), they are less likely to think that they need to be better off before they are ready to be transformed and fed by God.

Isaiah questions us: “Why do we spend our lives for that which is not bread, and our labour for that which does not satisfy”?

Let us choose ways in our community that are inclusive, helping others to feel welcome and accepted just as they are.

So will their thirst be quenched, and ours too. So will our fears be released, and theirs too.