

March 7, 2010

Scripture: Luke 13: 1-9

Sermon: "Self-Transformation"

Our Lenten journey continues and we are one step closer to the cross. And we find ourselves in that midway period. At the beginning of Lent, we were all filled with a great sense of discipline. We all had good intentions of what we were going to give up or what we were going to add to help us grow during this Season of Lent. We thought that the next six weeks would be interesting and that we could handle the added discipline.

First couple of days, maybe first couple of weeks, it was easy to follow this specific discipline but now...it's a little harder. Life is starting to creep in. Things are piling up. Situations pull for our whole attention. And we find that those moments of discipline, those moments of spiritual nourishment are getting pushed to the side, or we find ourselves saying, "I'll do double time tomorrow."

It's the middle part that's the hardest. We start losing strength. We start losing the desire. We start slipping back into regular routine and those moments of spiritual renewal, spiritual growth get lost in the mix. And we lose the openness to self-transformation.

It's in the middle part that we need a little push, need a little reminder, need a little cue. And that is what our Scripture offers us today. We hear a call to repent. We get a reminder that life is short. We get an invitation to once again open ourselves to the opportunity to transform and to reform ourselves as people of faith.

Jesus is now in Jerusalem and he is talking to people about the Kingdom of God. He has talked to them about reading the signs of weather but not being able to read the signs of the times. And so the crowds' response is our Scripture today. A group comes up to Jesus and says, "Look, here's a sign of the times for you. There were some Galileans who were worshipping in the Temple, minding their own business and Pilate came in and killed them. That's a sign of the times. God must have been mad at them because they were sinners. God must have killed them because of something that they did wrong. That's the only logical answer." And Jesus responds by saying, "Really, you think that is a sign of the times. They died because they were sinners and God was unhappy with them. What about this? Remember when the tower fell on those 18 people? Had they done anything wrong? Do you think that they were bigger "sinners" than other people who were spared? They were simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Accidents happen. Powers that be can be cruel for no reason. No matter, how much you plan, death happens to all of us. Life is fragile.

God doesn't kill people because they sinned. God doesn't work that way. Sometimes there are no logical answers to explain the mystery of life and why some things happen. What God wants more than anything is for God's people to repent, to change their behavior and attitude, to transform ourselves into the people that God created us to be.

Let me tell you a story, a story of grace, a story of hope, a story of mercy. There was this farmer and he had this orchard of fig trees. Now, everyone knows that fig trees aren't really good for

much else beyond...Making figs. So, the farmer comes in and notices one tree is not producing figs so he calls over the foreman and says, "Cut down that tree. Plant another one in its spot."

And the foreman responds, "Look give me some time. Let me nurture the tree. Let me spread a little fertilizer around it. Let's give it some time."

That's how God works. That's the God we know and worship. That's what God wants for all of us. To produce fruit, to bear witness, to live out the principles of God's Kingdom here on earth. God wants all of God's children to repent and bear fruit. To be transformed and re-formed into vessels of grace and mercy.

Jesus knows that the crowd wants justice, a way to explain away the bad stuff, but he wants the crowd to understand that what we need more than justice is mercy. Yes, our God is a God of justice, and yes, God has the final word. And that word is a mercy, a word of grace. He challenges the crowd to really think about God's justice. If God was only a God of justice, then we would all be in trouble. What we need is "grace of 'one more year' to produce 'more fruit.'" God is a God of justice and grace. It is a both/and situation. And we have no control over God's justice in the grand scheme of things. We are not God. Thanks be to God!

As people of faith, there is only one thing that we can do with faced with God's justice, when faced with God's grace, when faced with the urgency and fragility of life and that is to repent, to change our ways and attitude, to transform ourselves through prayer, through service, through community, through the Bible, and most importantly, allow ourselves to be transformed by opening ourselves up to God's grace and God's mercy.

Jesus wants the crowd and us to understand that we are not promised tomorrow, we don't know when death will come, just like the Galileans in the story or the others who met their end in a tragic accident. Jesus says that's not the point. The point is the here and now and the need to repent. Jesus wants the crowd and us to understand that repentance is not a one time deal, repentance is not hellfire and damnation, repentance doesn't happen on its own." Repentance is an "ongoing attitude towards one's life". It takes time, it takes patience. It takes God's care and God's grace.

Jesus wants everyone to understand that life is fragile and that "fragility demands urgency,[and once we understand that, we realize that the] urgency of life..has carved out opportunity for us to seize God's graciousness. Because life is so uncertain, because bad things happen to good people, because we are faced with uncertainty, we begin to understand that we are all vulnerable and we begin to look for certain answers, for things we can control, for things that can be explained logically.

Jesus says it doesn't work that way. Life doesn't work that way, that "all that is certain in this life is the mystery of life and that we don't have all the answers." And so he says that we use doubts and fears as a way to control the uncertainty but these things only add to the confusion and all they do is separate us more and more from God and shut ourselves off to the opportunities for grace and mercy in this world.

What we hear in our Scripture today is an invitation, an invitation to put aside the doubts and fears and an opportunity to be transformed by God's love, know that we cannot do it all by ourselves. We realize that once we are transformed and reformed by God's love, we will see this world through different eyes. We will understand the world a little differently because we see the world through eyes of grace, eyes of love.

In our Scripture today, Jesus said to the crowd and to us, if we really need answers, here is what we do know: "that in the presence of God, through our experience of Jesus Christ, we get a God whose love in our lives challenges us and enables us to live without all the answers, we get a God who is willing to dig around our hearts, patiently encouraging us towards repentance and faithfulness and fruitfulness. We get a God who has given God's whole life to us so that we might come to learn how to give our lives to God more fully."

Here's what we do know: that "the Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with [us] not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance." That's the Good news for us today who are searching, who are wandering, who are being transformed and reformed into the people that God created us to be.

The invitation of Lent is to repent, "to pay attention in a different direction, to focus on what brings life and leave death to do its own thing", to transform ourselves, to re-form our actions and attitude, not because of hellfire and damnation, not because we did something wrong and not because we are "bad" people."

We receive the invitation to repent because we realize that we cannot "make ourselves different by ourselves. We are only human. We are finite. We have imperfections. We have doubts and fears. We want to control the mystery of life. And it's only when we let go and let God, it's only when we open ourselves up to the opportunity of God's grace in this world, it's only when we let ourselves be transformed by God's love, that we can bear fruit, that we can live out the principles of God's Kingdom here on earth, that we can bear witness to the life-giving hope that can be found only through God.

It's only by being transformed by God's love and by God's grace can we truly be made different. And once we do that, our minds and our lives will "reflect the compassion and care that God has given [us]."

"God transforms us through grace, a grace that calls us to be generous toward those still trapped" and "[We] will not be able to meet Jesus in [our] bodies while [our] bodies remains full of doubts and fears. Jesus came to free [us] from those bonds and so create in [us] a space where [we] can be with him...Do no despair, thinking that [we] cannot change ourself after so many years. Simply enter into the presence of Jesus as we are and ask him to give us a fearless heart where he can be with us. We cannot make ourselves different. Jesus came to give us a new heart, a new spirit, a new mind, and a new body. Let him transform us by his love..."

The invitation today is to repent, to be transformed by God's love, and to be re-formed into the people that God created us to be. The invitation is one of grace and one of mercy. The invitation is one of hope and justice.

The invitation is to experience self-transformation through God's grace, through God's love, through God's presence in our lives. The invitation is one of new beginnings and new life. May we be transformed and reformed into people of God's Kingdom along our Lenten Journey.

Amen.