

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

Robin E. Lostetter

First Presbyterian Church, Bordentown NJ

March 21, 2010, Lent V C

Luke 13:1-9 (lection from Lent III C)

Jesus 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 around it and put *manure* on it – *manure!* If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" That parable concluded Jesus' conversation in Luke, chapter 13.

OK, quiz time! For those of you old enough to remember Johnny Carson on the Tonight Show, here's an answer posed to Carnac the Magnificent, in search of the question . . . or for you younger folk, think of Jeopardy on TV.

“ Glenn Beck and The Bucket List”

What two things kept going through Robin's head while writing this sermon, but have no real direct relevance to the sermon?

OK . . . Maybe you'll find them going through your head too . . . maybe they'll come back – Glenn Beck and The Bucket List – but I leave their relevance up to you.

Now, here's a question in search of an answer:

What do 12-Step Programs / Jewish Teshuváh / & the United States Senate have in common?

If I were to tell you the commonality is manure, you will surely say “yes” - but only if it has to do with politicians!!

Well, it isn't the commonality, but it is a factor in the commonality.

What 12-Step Programs, Jewish atonement (teshuváh in the Hebrew)¹, and The United States Senate have in common is *reconciliation*. And reconciliation requires humility. And humility is represented in our scripture today by the word “manure”.² It's the only time that word appears in the New Testament.

But now we need to eliminate the US Senate from our trio, because their version of reconciliation, though it might bring to mind manure, is actually quite the opposite of the word as it is used in 12-step programs and Jewish atonement. So let us substitute in its place the word repentance, or *metanoia* in the Greek. Now we have a trinity of 12-Step Programs, Atonement, and Repentance. (. . . and manure . . .)

In our story from Luke, some people told Jesus about the Galileans who were not only murdered by Pilate, but whose blood he had mingled with the blood of their temple sacrifices. “This is an outrage!! C'mon, Jesus, join us in some satisfying righteous anger!”

I had a friend who enjoyed righteous indignation. Diane was on the staff of 1st Presbyterian Church in Lockport, along with Laurie Tiberi - our guest preacher 2 weeks ago, and myself. We had a music school in residence at the church, and both Laurie and Diane signed up for piano lessons. One day, Diane came down to the office and spouted true righteous anger: It was the second week in a row that her teacher didn't show up, and - darn it - she had better things to do than to drive in from the suburbs, after practicing hard all week,

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

and be stood up!! Now our level-headed secretary, Bonnie, inquired about who the teacher was, etc., and pulled out a chart. Yes, that teacher was supposed to be here. “What room did you go to, Diane? Hmmmm . . . your teacher isn’t scheduled for that room, she’s supposed to be down the hall . . . why don’t you go check again?” And so it was that Diane won the staff’s “I Lost My Head” award for that week!

“Jesus, don’t you hear? Pilate is wicked! He preys on good people like us! Let’s saddle up the lynch mob and go get ‘im!”

But Jesus is level-headed, a bit like Bonnie the Lockport church secretary. He’s also wise, and he’s the Prince of? (They answer . . .) Peace. And his response is, “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 what about 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?” He might have added, “what about the people living in Haiti - or Chile - or New Orleans - or, yes, what about those who died when the Twin Towers of Manhattan fell?” And again, his answer is, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

So there’s the gardener, piling on the manure. “Let’s get humble, folks,” he says. You weren’t spared because you’re better than those Galileans, nor the folk in Jerusalem, or Haiti, or Chile, or New Orleans, or Manhattan. They were sinners. You are sinners. And you better repent and fly right, because time’s a-wasting. You too may perish, through unforeseen circumstances. Better to live each day with no regrets, no desire for retribution. Instead, here’s how you should live – I believe your prophet Micah summed it up well. Remember from synagogue school? “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

OK, that’s the lesson in the first part of today’s scripture. R.Alan Culpepper summarizes it this way: “Luke dismisses the popular, but unworthy, theology of retribution without offering any simplistic answers to atrocities and calamities. If human beings die by the sword, by accident, or by natural disaster, it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins while sparing others.”³

So let’s get back to the parable of the fig tree that follows Jesus’ conversation debunking this relative severity of sinfulness. The parable seems an unlikely follow up to his rather stern, “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

We’re led to believe that the fig tree is in need of repentance. It has not produced good fruit. The biblical list of the fruits of the spirit includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22) Hmmmm . . . not a lot about righteous anger in there. Nor retribution.

If we push this parable as a metaphor, who would be the tree? Right. We would.

And who would be the gardner? — I already gave you a hint that he’s pouring on manure! Right. Jesus would be the gardner, the Intercessor for us – who pleads for us.

And the vineyard owner might be the Creator . . . the one who places the fig tree in the vineyard for the purpose of its producing fruit.

The lesson in the parable seems to be a little more direct than that of the previous conversation. Returning to Alan Culpepper’s summary of the passage, he adds these 2 sentences: “Luke balances the warnings of God’s judgement with promises of God’s mercy. God would give even an unfruitful fig tree another chance.”

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

Another author puts it colorfully: “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. The farm owner says, ‘Cut that damned tree down.’ His head gardener says, “First, let me aerate the soil around it and throw some manure on the poor thing. After that give the tree one more year, and if it does not produce, chop it to the ground.’”

This author continues, “So, just when we begin to stir up flattering, heroic images of ourselves in full battle dress, ready to wipe evil off the face of the earth, Jesus knocks us off our moral high horses. He brings us down to earth and back to ourselves, with talk of fertilizer and a scruffy tree. He says, ‘Ask yourself if you are like that fig tree. Are you bearing fruit or just taking up space?’ It is enough to ruin your appetite for self-righteous anger.”⁴

Up until now, if you’ve related to the fig tree in the story, you’ve probably thought about things you’ve done, or that you continue to do, that would benefit from true repentance . . . turning away from sin and turning toward God. But let’s take a step back. Let’s look at ourselves collectively. What do we, as a church, need to repent of?

Perhaps we should start at the top, at least what much of the global Church considers the top. Let’s look at Pope Benedict XVI’s apology yesterday to victims of child sex abuse by clergy in Ireland. In his pastoral letter he said, “You have suffered grievously and I am truly sorry.”⁵ We are so desensitized to apologies from celebrities — the list seems endless: Tiger Woods, Akio Toyodas, Mark Sanford, David Paterson, Eliot Spitzer, Larry Craig, and John Edwards — we are no longer satisfied with the “I’m sorry”. At first it was refreshing for someone to take responsibility for their actions. But after many empty apologies, we want proof of repentance. And so the Pope, too, falls prey to cynics. Has he gone far enough? Why didn’t he ask for major restructuring or the resignation of errant priests? But it is, indeed, a first step in *teshuva*, as described by Rabbi Sarah H. Reines. First there needs to be a recognition of our wrongdoing, then an expression of regret. Whether the next steps of reconciliation or restitution and true change will follow remains to be seen.

And what about other church bodies? The Presbyterian Church USA is in the process of what one might call repentance. In this case, it’s repentance for “doing things right rather than . . . doing the right things.”⁶ You may have heard of the “FOG” report. F.O.G. are the initials for “Form of Government.” And at this summer’s General Assembly, a report on the proposed “nFOG” (or NEW Form of Government) will be presented to the commissioners. It will include “recommendations to add Foundations of Presbyterian Polity as a new section to the *Book of Order*, as well as a proposed revision of the Form of Government and an advisory handbook.”⁷ Why? Well, the general consensus is that the *Book of Order* has dictated a “regulatory” way of being church, and something with more flexibility is needed for the more diverse 21st century Presbyterian denomination, something that places mission first. So the attempt is being made to distill what is essential, and place the rest in a subsidiary position — to reject the idolatry of human-made rules.

For we who tout “decently and in order” as our watchword, this is an attempt at true turning — repentance, if you will — in the interest of being more faithful to Christ, the head of the Church.

And our presbytery? Similarly, a few years ago we passed new stream-lined Bylaws, in partnership with slightly more specific Standing Rules. Why? Because standing rules can be changed quickly by a simple

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

vote. Changing bylaws requires lugubrious multiple readings and meetings prior to a vote. To do ministry in today’s world, we, the Presbytery, have tried to become more flexible, more responsive.

And the more local “us”? What do we need to do to repent, lest we fail to produce fruit and perish? I can’t answer that question, but you can. In the months ahead, we will be doing a mission study — a process that seeks to discern the mission of this congregation in this time and place.

We will explore our history, consider our community setting, seek ways to strengthen the fruitful ministries we’re involved in, bid farewell to ministries and activities that have passed their prime, and look imaginatively toward the future. As we seek growth, it may be easy to throw up our hands and blame all sorts of factors . . . Hollywood and the media, technology, religious pluralism, liberals or fundamentalists, young people or old people. But, as Corrie Ten Boom has said, “The blood of Jesus never cleansed an excuse.”⁸

One thing we do know is that we want to be here into the future; to thrive, not just survive; to reach out to seekers and doubters (even when they may be ourselves!); to nurture our children; and to respect and care for our aging members. To produce good fruit. What we have no way of knowing yet is how we will get there. Rachel Naomi Remen, the author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, offers a word of hope on that subject: “At any given time, the will of God might be unknown, but the presence of God [is] certain and [is] the only certainty anyone need[s] in order to live.”⁹

© Robin E. Lostetter, 2010

ENDNOTES

1. “Rabbi Sarah H. Reines, “Turning Ourselves Around”, *The Living Pulpit, Vol. 16, No. 2: Atonement*, p. 8: “*Teshuva* expresses a process of reorientation that demands a complete change of mind, heart, and behavior. It requires (1) recognizing our wrongdoing, (2) expressing our regret, (3) doing our best to reconcile with the injured party or, at least, make appropriate restitution to those we have wronged, and (4) changing our ways. We achieve full teshuva when, faced with the reality of our wrongdoing, we acknowledge the transgression, then choose an appropriate and ethical response. At that point, we will know we have turned away from evil and towards righteousness.”
2. I am indebted to Daniel G. Deffenbaugh for his insight on “manure” in “Theological Perspective [on Luke 13:1-9]”, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, p. 96.
3. R.Alan Culpepper, “Luke”, *New Interpreters Bible, Volume IX [Luke, John]*, pp. 270-272: “Luke balances the warnings of God’s judgement with promises of God’s mercy. Luke also dismisses the popular, but unworthy, theology of retribution without offering any simplistic answers to atrocities and calamities. If human beings die by the sword, by accident, or by natural disaster, it is not because God has arbitrarily chosen to punish them for their sins while sparing others. God would give even an unfruitful fig tree another chance.”
4. Rodney Clapp, “Pastoral Perspective [on Luke 13:1-9]”, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2*, p. 96.
5. <http://www.katu.com/news/national/88739077.html>
6. <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/pdfs/FAQ-sept-09.pdf> “The current Form of Government has served the church ably over the past quarter century. The bedrock historic principles of Presbyterian governance will continue to order our lives together today and into the future, just as they have guided those who witnessed before us. At the same time, the world in which we as 21st-century Presbyterians proclaim the gospel is not the world of the 1950s, or even the 1980s. The proposed Foundations of Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government are intended to help the church better meet the needs of mission in the 21st century.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity gathers together in three succinct chapters the historical and theological provisions that have defined, and continue to define, our church life together. Placing this bedrock material into a separate section of the Book

“THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES”

of Order provides an excellent teaching tool to explain who and what we are.

The proposed new Form of Government reestablishes for the church a Constitution to govern us as the whole church. The current Form of Government has evolved over the years from a Constitution into a regulatory manual that attempts to provide a “one size fits all” answer to every situation faced by congregations and presbyteries. The problem with this regulatory approach is that the diverse, multicultural environment in which we do mission – an environment radically different from the 1980s, let alone the 1950s – no longer permits a “one size fits all” approach if we are to do mission effectively.

The proposed new Form of Government lifts up the constitutional standards that are essential to our life together, while at the same time empowering councils (governing bodies) at all levels to respond more effectively to the ministry and mission needs that each faces. The proposed new Form of Government is more relevant to the current life of the church and is sufficiently adaptable so as not to require biennial modification.

Our current regulatory-based way of “doing church” often leads councils to focus on doing things right rather than concentrating on doing the right things.

7. <http://www.pcusa.org/formofgovernment/>

8. Lee K. Ellenwood, compiler, “Quotations on Atonement,” *The Living Pulpit, Vol. 16, No. 2: Atonement*, p. 46.

9. Rachel Naomi Remen, “Promises, Promises”, *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, p. 189.