

THE SHATTERING CROSS: Repentance

Luke: 13:1-9

Spring has come. The earth has tilted on its axis to the degree that sunshine and moonlight are now equal in measure with daylight on the increase until June. For some, this change has been exacerbated by moving the clock forward so that evenings are later and longer much to the pleasure of children who now have more time to play, if only they might tear themselves away from the i-pad. The downside from these children comes as they are roused in the dark to prepare for school, wondering why they have been called out of bed so soon.

Spring also encourage plant growth, the combination of gentle rain and prolonged sunshine combining to germinate and mature seeds. And where there are natural seeds, plants grow, wildflowers---particularly California poppies---bloom occasionally in spectacular floods of color, trees begin to leaf out along with blossoms that go often unseen or ignored, pinecones set, vines that have appeared to be dead now sprout leaves and later grapes, and hillsides take on a lively green color. Other plants take advantage of the season, species whose seeds have lain dormant awaiting the rains not quickly shoot up and flower simply and seed abundantly before it becomes too hot and dry from survival. These economic plants have a firm purpose of providing future generations of their kind, readying the world for the next generation that will spring up next spring. From a far distance, they create the green hillsides that proclaim new life and often please us mightily. Though botanists assign these plants a variety of Latin names, most gardeners know them by one---weeds.

Thus it is time, even here on the church campus, to attend to the weeds, lest they rob other plants of both sunlight and water, before their blooms unfold and the seeds ready themselves to be dispersed to other corners of the property. We are pleased to provide opportunities to wrestle these weeds into submission or rather exit. Some are already bending over to pluck these hearty plants from the ground, suspecting that their descendants will appear next year. Buckets, gloves, and weed pullers are available for any who would want to join in the task of weeding, even before April's Saturday of service wherein we prepare the campus for Easter. Drop by, the weeds await.

The gospel lesson assigned to this day has at least three parts to it and this triumvirate challenges us to extract a common trajectory of gospel. Evil seems to dominate this portion of Luke as we hear of murder, a fatal accident, and the possibly mortal decline of a fig tree. Death will come to all but will it be at the hand of another, in an unexpected event such as a collapse of a building, or as part of a natural end to life? And how shall we respond to the suggestion of death itself? Will we quickly and firmly turn aside from any consideration, ignoring this element of life? Several authors

have concluded that we as humans tend to depend upon denial to get us through, at least in modern, Western cultures, hoping that we can through great effort and expense we can take the sting from the subject of death by avoiding any suggestion of aging.

This might be experienced even at death when the mortician receives and prepares a body. A seminary professor, upon viewing his father in a casket, noticed that the funeral personnel had applied a heavy layer of pancake makeup to his father's face, attempting to smooth over all the wrinkles so that the deceased would appear younger and more peaceful. The professor asked the proud mortician for a wet cloth and began to wipe away the makeup. When the mortician protested, the son merely said, "My dad earned every one of his wrinkles" not so much as a sign of the father's advanced age but more as a result of having lived well, devoting his talents and skills to the well-being of the body and soul of others.

But the teaching of this scripture does not focus upon death but upon life, the new life that can come to any and all. We hear the word "repent" repeated and watch as the gardener attempts to overwhelm the owners command to cut down the fig with new efforts to help the fig blossom and bear fruit. Though a fig might be considered to have many characteristics of a weed for it can and does plant itself anywhere, the numerous seeds of the fig dropped by birds all over the landscape. Even in this campus, fig saplings have been removed less the fast growing tree crowd out flowering plants and even pomegranate bushes. The fig tree is both so prolific and widespread in climates such as our own to have begin one of the seven signature plants of modern Israel, at a level of honor with the olive and the palm, and even the pomegranate. But it too has a limited span of life, although in its more exotic forms might have been the sycamore that the short Zacchaeus climbed in Jericho to gain a better view of Jesus as he passed by, a tree to which tourists are still directed should they visit that ancient town in the Jordan River valley.

After the death of others by both human intention and accident, we may be relieved to learn that the unassuming fig tree will likely not come to the same end, although the tree is given but one more year to produce or else. We can be glad for a gracious and loving gardener who will dig and fertilize to increase the possibility that the fig will not only survive but thrive as the owner expects it to do. The truth is, in some year, the fig will come to end of its natural life and be uprooted and cut up for fuel. But for the moment, salvation has come to the fig, at least in its aboreal experience.

Acknowledging that salvation is a gift from God and not a result of our accomplished faith, how do we ready ourselves for this gift? Recognizing that repentance is both a call and an perspective, Jesus declares this activity to be needed.

We may hear of people "repenting" of a particular pattern of thinking and being. The word is sometimes confused with resolve, that is a person may "resolve" to cease

drinking or swearing, to give up fatty foods, to forego violence and greed and war and racism and acts of injustice and cold-hearted refusal to love neighbor, in a word, to “repent” of these dangerous and life-diminishing activities. This is all to the good for those who have been damaged, wounded, diminished by such actions, such perspectives.

One of the traditional practices of Lent is to “give up” a delight, an preferred action that often is to our detriment as though the season calls us to rehearse being a better person. Even the opening lesson of the season heard on Ash Wednesday suggests forgoing the accolades that might come as others honor us for our portrayal of faithful life, our abundance expressed by a loud clanging of numerous coins as these riches are thrown into the offering plate, our ability to pray with fluency and elegance, our eagerness to exhibit the pain that is part of fasting by contorting our face in agony. Jesus calls his disciples rather to not let the left hand know what the right is doing, to go into the closet to pray, and to wash the face to calm and cleanse. We, too, may forego something as important as honor and praise as we prepare for the festival of the Risen Christ. Some of those weeds we call “sin” may receive our attention and plucked from our lives, at least during these forty days.

Frequently, we are challenged to view the season as an opportunity to take up some new practice that promises to expand our faith. It might be a book study, weekly communion, daily devotion, special giving to help in disasters, experiencing icons, joining a prayer circle, committing ourselves to daily worship during Holy Week, even running the LA Marathon to benefit North Valley Caring, although the choice of date for the marathon has little to do with Lent and more as a response to weather, both heat and rain. Some of these practices may persist beyond Easter but most will return to previous ways of acting and eating, spending time and expressing devotion.

Repentance is more than resolve to rid ourselves of something---even of a delight---it is invitation to begin anew, to move in another direction, to turn attention to another aspect of the life of faith, not just for forty days but permanently. We shall all perish so why repent? Like the foolish landowner who, having be blessed by a spectacular harvest pulls down his barns to replace them with larger ones so that he will have more than enough food and thus be able to “eat, drink, and be merry” with his friends without a thought about hunger, particularly his own and further, have no concern about needy others who might benefit from this harvest. Repentance replaces rather than retreats. The weeds may be dug out so that new planting can occur. Repentance may call us to eat and drink with an eye for better health, to be respectful in our words, be peacemakers, to create justice, to love our neighbor even if they differ markedly from us, especially if we count them to be “enemy”.

Repentance is not reserved, however, to matters of the individual or the spirit. Repentance in the manner of faith always moves us toward greater truth, stronger faith.

In the past few decades, groups even governments and churches, have taken repented of their sins, sometimes only in the first sense of halting their abuse, occasionally to the fuller degree of taking up new attitudes, new activities. Some years ago, the national government offered money to citizens of Japanese heritage who had been arrested and imprisoned for years as a result of their heritage and culture. The people in power would not likely use the word for “repentance” to describe its act for we continue to undertake very similar activity though no longer directed toward the Japanese, now one of the government’s closest political allies.

The church has undertaken acts of repentance toward Native Americans whom it in past years had exploited, sometimes violently. It has expressed repentance toward other groups that the church has rejected, often by race but also by gender, culture and economic standing. We passively proclaim ourselves to be people with “Open hearts, open minds, and open doors”. Initially it seems that The United Methodist Church may have repented of its open hearts and minds, though doors remain mostly open, though not always easily discovered, hidden sometimes by walls and gates. We have traditionally been welcoming of all people, have counted all to be beloved children of God, prided ourselves in having congregations that are multi-racial, grateful for opportunities to extend care and love to those who have been wounded by systems and traditions.

At this moment, we can wonder if we shall continue with such unfaithful repentance by denying full participation of a people of a particular orientation and punishing those who would welcome them. The results of our recent General Conference are not conclusive yet for the Judicial Council will review the constitutionality of all that has taken place. There are some, however, including our bishop, who have resolved to act, whether it be leaving the denomination as a network of churches have vowed to do, even before the General Conference met, or departing a local congregation as some have done from this congregation, or planning a different, more graciously accepting gathering of churches despite what is described by a nearby pastor as “spiritual violence” directed toward brothers and sisters, parents and children, people and pastors. This is the question before us, even as we gather following the service for discussion in Carlson Fellowship Center following the service.

Are we ready to repent, ready for the new life promised by God and brought forth by the Spirit as it provides strength and guidance to follow in the way of Jesus who comes to be God’s Christ and our Lord, not just for this Lenten season but for all of life ahead? Perhaps this Spirit will cause us to set aside our thoughts and take up those of the God of love. For such an opportunity for the time to take it up, thanks be to God. .