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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, March 20, 2022

3rd Sunday in Lent/Year C

First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-9

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Gospel Reading: Luke 13:1-9

Sermon Title: "Notes on Mercy"

Theme

The warnings are plentiful and blunt on the third Sunday in Lent. Cut it out or get cut down! The warnings are accompanied by God's invitation to attentiveness: "Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live." The landowner's ultimatum is forestalled by the gardener's readiness to till the ground one more year. That is good news for all of us. Thanks be to God!

Text

First Reading: Isaiah 55:1-9

¹Ho, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.

³Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found,

call upon him while he is near;
⁷let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

¹I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” ⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. ¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. ¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Gospel: Luke 13:1-9

¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²[Jesus] asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?” ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So 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?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

Sermon

The First and Second Readings are replete with the LORD's exhortations and warnings to the LORD's people. At first glance, the Gospel Reading may sound equally ominous. But hang in there with me and I will teach you how these seemingly threatening readings are really "Notes on Mercy."

In the First Reading, the first verse, the LORD uses what I think is a beautiful metaphor to exhort everyone to return to the LORD. If we are thirsty and hungry, we should come to the LORD where our thirst and hunger will be satisfied *for free*. While this may have lost impact in our culture where there is, practically speaking, no shortage of food and drink, in the seventh century BCE, water and food could never be taken for granted.

Then in verse two, the LORD asks what I think is a timeless question: Why do we work so hard and spend our money on foods that are not good for us. With a better understanding of nutrition today, we know that we should not eat whatever we desire because the fatty, salty foods we all crave will contribute to our overall poor health. And while we could easily get into the weeds on a discussion about good eating habits, and that would be a good personal stewardship subject, these verses are not about eating habits and nutrition at all.

What the LORD is after with these thought-provoking metaphors is that;

- 1) we should be pursuing the LORD who is the giver of every good and perfect gift;
- 2) it is the pleasure of the LORD to give every good and perfect gift to us;
- 3) if we would listen and heed what the LORD has to say, we will thrive;
- 4) and finally, if we listen and heed what the LORD has to say, we will not only thrive but we will experience the LORD's mercy because we will hear those words that we often hear during Lent,

⁷"Return to the LORD, that he may have mercy."

Allow me to give you a practical example of what I am talking about. Most Pastoral Care and Counseling is listening to people talk about their failures to live godly lives, helping them realize that they are forgiven and loved, and encouraging them to do better. I am as guilty of this need as anyone. There is just something

about verbalizing our sinfulness and getting it off our chests, and hearing another person speak those words of mercy.

In verses two and three, the LORD said, "Listen carefully to me, so that you may live." But sometimes we can be so burdened with an issue in our lives that it can almost be paralyzing. This is not living and it is not of God. Rather, the LORD exhorts us to

⁶"Seek the LORD while he may be found,"

⁷"return to the LORD, that he may have mercy."

I was telling the Council last Tuesday that every element of our worship has meaning. Confession and Forgiveness, for example, is God's gift to us, because our sinfulness separates us from God. God is so holy that God cannot bear to look upon our sinfulness, so God turns God's back on us. But this is not God's desire, and it shouldn't be ours. God's merciful gift to us is confession, because in confession we *get the opportunity* to confess the sinfulness that separates us from God, especially those things *we* can't get over, and then we hear those words of mercy spoken to us and we know in faith that God forgives us. We find God's mercy in Confession and Forgiveness.

In the Second Reading, Paul was writing to the ornery Corinthians about whom he knew were involved in some sinful behavior. About that sinful behavior, Paul wrote that *we should not* put Christ to the test. Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," and Paul wrote that it works the other way too. After Jesus submitted himself to death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, we should not then, consider his mercy cheap grace. We can and we should do better. And God will help. Paul wrote,

^{13b}"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

In other words, tests of faith, provide us with the opportunity to prevail over tests, which then reinforces within us the knowledge that with God on our side, we can prevail over other tests, and that leads us to live ever more godly lives.

I hope I'm speaking for all of us when I say that for us, we are used to Paul's theology and it is not radical. But to the Jews of the first century, it was practically blasphemy.

In first-century Judaism, it was still widely understood that God gives us what we deserve. Do evil and God will punish with an even greater evil. But the Gospel Reading reveals a different potential outcome.

Jesus had been preaching and teaching on repentance to a crowd, and when someone reported an evil act of Pilate, the implication was that the victims must have deserved it. In response, Jesus referred to another accident that occurred in Siloam and said if they believed God gives people what they deserve, then they all need to repent. And let me say here, repentance, another word for confession, is always a good thing because God loves dispensing mercy. And God revealed in Jesus Christ is mercy manifested.

In the second part of this passage, verses six through nine, Jesus told a parable about a fig tree that refused to produce figs to illustrate his role in bringing mercy. Now I don't know anything about fig trees, so I googled it and according to HGTV.com, most fig trees take three to five years to start ripening fruit. Well, Jesus told us that the tree was planted three years earlier. So maybe we can understand the frustration to the owner of the vineyard – *to a degree*, but he was ready to be done with the fruitless fig tree and ordered the axe to be applied to it. But the tree has an advocate in the gardener who is willing to give the tree special attention for one more year to get it to produce. To this suggestion, the vineyard owner acquiesced.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

What does all this mean, you ask? The vineyard owner is God and the vineyard is God's creation. The fig tree is God's chosen people, the Jews. God placed the Jews among the rest of creation to be a *city on a hill* drawing the rest of creation to God. The gardener is Jesus who brings mercy to an otherwise hopeless situation. But notice the gardener only asks for one more year. The tree must produce fruit in that next year or be cut down.

We can conclude that the point of the parable is that the Jews must repent and produce as God intended or lose their place in the garden. And that would leave us off the hook completely! How convenient!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if this parable only applied to the Jews then Luke wasted his time putting it in his Gospel because the Jews didn't get it. So I am left to presume the parable applies to us as well, because we too are part of God's creation, and at his Ascension, Jesus told his apostles to take his Gospel to all nations, and so we are included in the parable.

So to review, God through the Holy Spirit is constantly guiding us in the way we should go. God does this out of God's great love so that we will thrive. God may even give us tests from time to time, to provide us with the opportunity to prevail over sinfulness and grow in godliness. God does not give us what we deserve or repay us evil for evil, but rather delights in giving mercy. But listen carefully, a day will come when the time to do the good we intended will pass, and then we will have missed out on an opportunity to please God.

Friends, scripture tells us that one day we will have our moment to give an accounting of our lives. Let us hope that God's memory for our sinfulness is short and God's memory of godliness is long and far out-reaches our sinfulness.

Prayer

Merciful God, today carries the potential for growth and new life. Help us to attend to those things in us that need to be nourished *and* weeded out. Encourage us to seek your mercy. Plant your word in us that we may grow in faithfulness and understanding, diligence and steadfastness. Shake us out of our dull routines so that we may take part in the Good News you continue to tell urgently and passionately. In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen