

How Much (fill in the blank) Is Enough?

Sermon, March 7, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9

Prior to the Gospel reading, I gave a little background to help enhance understanding of the text.

A well-intentioned effort of Pontius Pilate had antagonized the Jews. Jerusalem was chronically short of water, and when pilgrims crowded the city for the festivals, the shortage was acute. Upwards of three million faithful Jews or more converged upon the city for Passover. How do we know this? About 60 AD, one of Pilate's successors had a census taken of the lambs slain during Passover in Jerusalem; it amounted to a quarter of a million. It was a Passover regulation that there must be a minimum of a party of ten adults for each lamb; that means at least 2.5 million adult participants ... and this is not counting children. There was also a Roman detachment of some three thousand soldiers. That's potentially more than three times the population of Rhode Island crammed into this relatively small walled city! At Passover, Jerusalem would be literally bursting at the seams with crowds of the faithful. Not only was water needed to drink, but the continual sacrifices at the temple created a need for much water for washing and cleaning, a quarter of a million sacrificial lambs produce a lot of blood! Pilate, with good intentions, had an aqueduct built to convey water to the city from a spring about thirty-five miles away. However, he somewhat heavily-handedly took money from the Temple treasury to fund this project; he went over the heads of the Temple leadership to do so, and this provoked some of the more zealous Jews, colloquially known as the Galileans. Imagine our reaction if Mayor Avedisian just took our Endowment Fund to fund the town's building a new water main to the church. Multiply that a few hundred times over, and you'll have a rough equivalent of the Galileans' reaction to Pilate's appropriation. The people resented what Pilate meant to be a practical service; the Galilean zealots began to incite an uprising on the Temple steps. The exasperated Pilate mingled his soldiers with the rioters dressed in plain clothes, the disguised soldiers carried concealed weapons, and at a given signal they attacked. Many Galileans were clubbed or stabbed to death; this is believed to be the first incident referred to here in Luke 13. The second incident we know little about; it seems a tower structure had accidentally collapsed and crushed eighteen bystanders; some apparently believed these victims must have "done something" to have deserved their fate.

For the entire previous chapter prior to our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus has been calling for repentance ... for lives to be turned around to embrace God's mercy and gift of life. This, by the way, was the original meaning of the word "repent" ... it meant to turn. To repent doesn't necessarily mean to beat yourself up with shame and remorse and sorrow. The word in its original usage simply meant to turn around or turn back. If you were leaving your house and realized you forgot something and turned around to get it, well, that was a repentance experience. Yes, there's often a degree of regret and sorrow involved in repentance, of course. But the original meaning of the word is primarily about turning. Jesus isn't as interested in your shame as He is in your direction. The One Who calls Himself the Way just wants you to repent, to turn around, and start moving in the right direction.

But that is difficult because more often than not we have a lot invested in the *wrong* direction. After all, this wrong direction is all we've known, and we've been going this way for a long, long time. It's the way we thought we were supposed to go. It's the way others around us have been following. So, if we are going to turn around, or turn back, we will most likely need some help. And God has ways ... sometimes unusual and seemingly hard ways ... that will help us turn in the right direction.

Now, in today's reading, it looks like those listening to Jesus think He is talking about someone *e/*se who needs to repent ... that He's talking about the zealous Galileans Pilate had slaughtered, or the eighteen killed in Siloam when that tower fell on them who must have somehow deserved it. Perhaps those in the audience are trying to avoid Jesus' challenging words about repentance by playing the "But look; we are not bad as THEM" game. Yes, we know that game. But Jesus will have none of it and makes the point that all are in need of repentance. This is not about comparisons between ourselves and others. This is about living lives in response to God's gracious and patient invitation. One does not need to be thoroughly wicked in order to have to repent. Again, repenting means turning ... turning from the ways of life that leave you (and others around you) hurt, empty, confused, overwhelmed, aimless or simply out of touch with the Source of life. And like the gardener in the parable, God the Holy Spirit is patient, gracious and merciful, always cultivating contexts in our lives which might provide opportunity for you and I to turn in the right direction(s).

In this brief parable, the owner of the vineyard is fed up. There is this apparently useless fig tree planted in the middle of his vineyard. This tree has not produced any good fruit; all it seems to be doing is taking up space and good soil while producing nothing but leaves. So the owner of the vineyard tells his gardener to cut the tree down. But the gardener pleads, "Sir, leave it alone just one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down." Actually, the Greek literally translates: "That I may dig deep

around it and *throw dung* on it." Apparently, digging a ditch and heaping on the dung was the last-ditch method of fertilization for a fruitless fig tree. "Master, give this tree one last chance to produce fruit worthy of the ground it is taking up. Let me dig a ditch around it (a literal 'last-ditch effort'), pile a lot of manure on it, and let's see what happens." The master is probably thinking to himself, "How much dung will it take to get this tree to 'turn around'?" But he apparently allows the gardener license to do as he proposed.

What a picture! The image is one of the Owner of the Vineyard allowing manure to be heaped over the roots of our fruitless lives as a last-ditch effort to help us grow into who we are called to be. This may strike some as a bit, um, earthy; but this isn't my parable, this is Jesus' parable. He insinuates God may do and/or allow anything and everything, and is able to use anything and everything that gets heaped onto our lives, as last ditch efforts to turn us around and get us properly rooted and grounded and producing good fruit ... fruit, by the way, that will be a staple source of nourishment for all. I think a piercing question of this little parable is this: How much waste in your life will it take? How much, um, *fertilizer* in your life is enough? What will it take to turn you around? I can't tell you how many testimonies I've heard from people in churches I've served who have come to that nadir point in their lives where they just grow weary of the waste, the manure, that has piled up in their lives largely as a result of ignoring God and His good ways. Relationships that have been toxic. Things they have sought after and/or worked hard for but have done little more than just suck the very life out of them. Achievements that have left them empty. When they reached that nadir point, something clicked in their spirit ... and they turned. The realization of the sheer amount of waste engulfing their roots is what it took to get them to repent, to turn (or re-turn), to our Lord and His church. That waste produced a fertilizer that helped them grow.

The prophet Isaiah asks a question as appropriate for us today as it was when he asked it some 2,600 years ago: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?" Good question! Why is it we spend so much time absorbed by things that really mean so little? As someone put it, "Thirty seconds after we die, we are going to ask ourselves, 'Why did I waste so much time on (*fill in the blank*)? Why did I waste so much time, energy and resources worrying about that? What was I thinking?'" Isaiah asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

The Lenten season is as good a time as any for us to reflect on what we are thinking, on how we are spending our time, or more correctly still, on how we are spending our lives. On this third Sunday of Lent, where do you need to repent, turn around, to embrace God's love and offer of life? "Spending our lives" ... that's an interesting phrase when you think about it. When we spend money, we give it away in exchange it for something else we think of equal value. Is it the same with how you and I spend our lives? Are you spending your life for something of equal or greater value? What are we giving our lives away for? More money? More comfort? More security? And how much time and energy and resources from our lives are spent, dissipated, in seemingly relentless worry about such things? Is it worth it? How useful will those things be thirty seconds after we are dead? Will we look back and ask, "Why did I spend so much of my life on that?" To paraphrase the prophet's good question: "Why do you spend your life on that which does not satisfy?"

Isaiah's good question is accompanied by a good invitation: "Come! Come without money and without cost." Isaiah is telling his audience, the captive Jews in Babylon, that God's invitation to the life He offers is free. God gives it away to any who will turn to receive it. It is as simple as, "Seeking the Lord while He may be found, calling upon Him while he is near." "Let the wicked man forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts, Let him turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He will freely pardon." All that is required is some turning action on our part ... action that refocuses our priorities, action that redirects our resources, action that changes the way we "spend our lives."

There are so many other invitations out there clamoring for our attention, promising us life, imploring us to spend our lives on them. But the voice of the prophet rings across the centuries, "Seek the *Lord* while He may be found, call on Him while he is near." OR, as some translate this, "Seek the Lord *where* He may be found." And, of course, that is why you are all here. You are seeking the Lord *where* He may be found, *while* He may be found ... while you have life and breath and time to do so, and that is a good thing to do. And the good news Jesus makes clear is that even in our distractions ... those waste-producing, life-spending sprees that ultimately leave us running on "empty" ... the Lord is always seeking *us*, working on us, bringing things into our lives to turn us around, even as a last resort allowing the accumulated waste to act as fertilizer to cause us to grow, that we may bear good fruit ... that we may be productive, prosperous, and a blessed source of nourishment and refreshment to all around us.

"Seek the Lord *while* He may be found, and *where* He may be found." (*And here I pointed to the Table in order to extend the invitation to Communion*). "Call upon Him while He is near. Come, take wine and bread without money or price." Actually, there is a price for this wine and bread, but it is not a price we had to pay ... our spiritual nourishment has been purchased for us by the broken body and shed blood of our Lord, Who came that all who repent might have LIFE, and have it to the full.