

April 2, 2017

“The R Word”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 13: 1-9

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As I was thinking about this week's sermon, I realized it was almost the end of Lent, with Palm Sunday next week, and then, before you know it, Easter will be here. And I realized this would probably be my last chance until Lent next year to preach a good, "hell fire and brimstone" sermon on the... shhh... shhh... on the “R” Word. You all know what that is, don't you? The "R" word... repentance. Because most of us have an aversion to the term "repentance", and all that term connotes and implies.

Now, a couple of years ago, I read an excerpt from John Steinbeck's famous novel, *Travels With Charley*. And it's about repentance, so I want to read it to you again. Charley was his beloved dog, and one Sunday morning as they were traveling around the country, he left Charley in the car while he visited a new church. He writes. "The service did my heart and I hope my soul some good. It had been long since I have heard such (a sermon on repentance). It's a practice now a days to hear clergy tell us that our sins aren't really sins at all, but accidents set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister assured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. And she was right. We didn't amount to much to start with, and due to our own tawdry efforts we've been slipping up ever since. Then, having softened us up, she went into a glorious sermon, a fire and brimstone sermon. Having proved that we were no damn good, she painted with cool certainty what was likely to happen to us if we didn't (repent) and for which (she) didn't hold out much hope. She spoke of hell as an expert, not the mush-mush hell of these soft days, but a well stoked, white-hot hell served up by technicians of the first order. This reverend brought it to a point where we could understand it; a good hard coal fire; plenty of draft, and a squad of open-hearth devils who put their hearts into their work, and their work was me. For some years now God has been a pal to us, like a father playing softball with his son. But the God described by this minister cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. I felt so revived in spirit after that, that I put an extra five dollars in the plate. (And that feeling) lasted clear through till.... Tuesday. Why I even considered beating Charley to give him some of that same satisfaction as well.”

Now obviously, Steinbeck wrote all that tongue in cheek, but the truth is, sin and the need for repentance – the need to change our ways, are things we would all rather not talk about it. But Jesus clearly did in today's scripture. Twice, he said, “Repent, or you will perish.” Then he told a 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.” And the gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, and I will give it special attention and put fertilizer on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.”

Now, I remember some years ago, John said to me, “I don’t understand what this parable is trying to say.” So I explained it to him, and you could see that “deer in the headlights of an 18-wheeler” look on his face. Because this is what it means. The landowner is God. The gardener is Jesus. And the tree – is you and me. And what God is implying is that if we are a tree that doesn't bear fruit, we should be cut down. Can you imagine God cutting us down. Angry enough at our lack of fruit, our lack of righteousness, that He wants us gone.

Now believe me. I don’t like preaching this parable anymore than you like hearing it. We’d all rather hear that parable of the lost sheep that was found, or the prodigal son who is welcomed back, or some other parable where we hear about God’s unconditional love and forgiveness. But not his wrath. No, in today’s society and in today’s church culture especially, this is a difficult parable no one wants to hear. Because today, churches and their pastors are expected to be welcoming and popular and make people feel good. No one wants to talk about sin and the need for repentance. But one of the great theologians of our time, Yale professor Richard Niebur, addresses how this kind of thinking actually takes away from God's greatness, God's majesty, in that it makes God's plan for the salvation of the world meaningless. Which makes Jesus' great sacrifice for us on the cross meaningless as well. Instead, he says, we would rather believe in, “A God without wrath, who brings men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the teachings of a Christ without a cross.” Yes, there was a time, probably when this parable was told, that the general consensus was, ‘man is very bad and God is very mad.’ Over time, however, that’s become, ‘man is not so bad, and God is not so mad.’ Now it’s even become ‘God can be bad, and man is getting mad.’ And so today the consensus might be summed up, “Just who does God think He is? Who does he think he is that he should, well, put the fear of God into us!”

So consider then, the real issue is not so much about God’s wrath, as it is about the cause of God’s wrath – our human sinfulness . We see the results of sin all around us. Not only out there in the world – war, violence, injustice, evil of all kinds. But we can also see it too often in our own lives.

Relationships are affected because we’re impatient, uncompromising, unforgiving, more concerned about our own feelings than others. We let worry and stress overwhelm us, and so we find ourselves not

trusting God and in doing so, separate ourselves from God. That's why worry is our greatest infidelity toward God. We go chasing after material and earthly treasures, rather than focusing on the pursuit of heavenly treasures. We don't pray or bring God into our everyday activities, and then we wonder why our lives are a mess. Yes, we have to admit that at times we just don't bear good fruit. And the first step to fix this situation, is to honestly admit our sinfulness. And therein may lie our saving grace.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, *Speaking of Sin*, writes, "Sin (may be, in a peculiar sense), our only hope, because the realization that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken." And so if we can get to that point where we can honestly admit our sins, admit we're missing the mark in some way, admit we do need help to change, then the whole issue of God's wrath becomes a moot point. Because God has no wrath when his children want to "set things right again." No wrath and no anger. Only love and compassion and forgiveness. That's why Jesus pleads with us so emphatically in today's Scripture, "Repent, change your ways, or you will perish."

So when we really analyze this parable, we find it shouldn't frighten us in the least. Instead it should give us incredible hope. Because let me tell you the most important sentence in the parable. "Sir, let the tree alone and I will give it special attention." "Sir let the tree alone until I can care for it and nourish it." "Sir, give me more time." That's right, Jesus telling God to give us another chance so he can help us. Saying, "I will commit my life to work on them, to teach them, to nourish them, to care for them and then even to sacrifice and die for them." So do you see why it's so important that we admit our sins and repent? For once we do admit them, this frees us to fully admit that we need help. Repentance opens us up to his wonderful transforming power. So you see, brothers and sisters, this parable is not one of fear, but one of incredible promise.

And how can we know this promise is one we can trust in? Well, look at the cross. Because remember that hillside where Christ was crucified. When he took upon himself all the sins of the world. Well, there were two other crosses up on that hill where two other men, hardened criminals, were being crucified at the same time. One of the criminals began to shout insults at Jesus saying, "Aren't you the Christ? Then save yourself and us." But for some reason the other criminal stopped him. Hanging there, being punished and about to die for all his sins, he has a change of heart, and repents. His only hope after a lifetime bearing no fruit was the final admission to himself and God that something in his life was wrong, was broken. So at that moment, he said to the other, "You should fear God! We are

being punished justly, getting what we deserve for what we did. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And the gardener, Jesus, said to him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Amen.