

How does God Respond to our Sinfulness?

[Luke 13:1-9](#)

Our Gospel story for this 3rd Sunday of Lent
is a real cliff hanger.
How does the story really end?

Did the vinedresser have to cut the tree down
For not bearing fruit?
Did the tree get a year's reprieve?
More time? Another chance?
What do you think?

For me, today's gospel story revolves around the question:
How does God respond to our sinfulness?

We can assume from our reading
That somebody and maybe more than one somebody
Believes that the degree of punishment from God
Is related to the degree of sin...
Worse offenders get the more horrendous punishments.

Jesus would not have responded with his emphatic **NO!**
Unless some people were assuming that
"those" Galileans, the ones whose blood was mingled by Pilot
With pagan sacrificial blood!
And those eighteen, who were killed when the tower of Siloam FELL on them
MUST have been REALLY, REALLY BAD in the eyes of God
To end up the way they did...

For we know, don't we?
God is a God of wrath...
Of painful punishment...
Of vengeance...

NO! Jesus says
That's not the whole story.

What about God's justice?
God's mercy?
God's forgiveness?

God is not to be pinned down.
Nor was Jesus.

Remember the question?

How many times should we forgive?

Seven times?

Try "SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN", says Jesus.

How long does a shepherd search for a lost sheep

Before he quits?

Perhaps 24 hours?

"UNTIL HE FINDS IT", says Jesus.

Does God mete out the worst punishment for the worst sinners?

NO! says Jesus...

"BUT UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL PERISH."

Sin does not come in degrees.

Sin is our separation from God.

Separation is separation, no matter what the distance...

The connection is broken.

Sin is part of our daily reality.

Our relationship with God is not yet perfected.

We are frequently in need of repentance...

Returning to God...

Frequently in need of God's forgiveness.

Imagine the images Jesus is offering to those who want to listen,

Offering to us this morning:

We are the fruit trees, not growing very well,

separated from the best growing conditions,

With our acceptance of God's forgiveness,

Comes the manure around the fruit trees.

And the loosening of hard packed soil.

Can you see the image working?

With God's forgiveness and our repentance

Comes a openness to new learning, new wisdom,

A renewed acceptance of our dependence on God's grace,

God's mercy in our lives.

A powerful quote resurfaced just in time for us this morning.

from the writings of H.A. Williams,

Former Dean of Trinity College, Cambridge,

an Anglican monk and author
He died, in 2006 at the age of 86.

According to H.A. Williams: "The wrath of God is God's refusal to allow us to rest until we have become fully what we are... Unrest, doubt, the sense of apparent futility or staleness or ineffectiveness or drabness, or the sharper deeper wounds which everybody now and then must endure – these are God in his wrath, not punishing us, but refusing to let sleeping dogs lie, insisting that we be not less than we have it in us to be. I hope it is obvious that the wrath of God is completely identical with his love. It is not another aspect of God, but one and the same thing." (I have to say it again....)

With God there is no separation
Of wrath from love
Of justice from mercy.

They are co-mingled/intertwined in ways hard for us to understand...
Hard, difficult...
Because God is God
And we are not.

What does God do with our sinfulness?
I imagine a multitude of unique responses
Designed to get our attention and turn us back
In the direction we were created to live and move and have our being.

Repentance is our movement, our actions to God's initial wake-up call...
Repentance is not just guilt and remorse,
Saying "I'm sorry."
Repentance is always more than words.
Repentance is the action of changed intentions,
Stepping out in a new direction.

Forgiveness is God's response to our sin.
Repentance is our response to God's forgiveness.

Paul says it like this:
"God is faithful and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength,
He will also provide the way out..."
The way to forgiveness and new life...
The way to repentance and change.

I recall a difficult, disturbing encounter that I had with a young woman
Actually, I can only assume that she was young.
This woman was stuck...
Stuck in guilt, remorse, despair,
Hopelessness, consuming fear.
She was stuck in the past, a bad choice, a mistake.

She would not tell me her name

She would not come to see me.
She would not let me go to see her.

She read the Bible, but could only hear and see
The wrath, the vengeance, the anger of God...
She believed that God's forgiveness would only come after she was dead.

Remember what Jesus said?
"BUT UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL PERISH."
This young woman was perishing,
spiritually, and perhaps physically dying.

Possibly, each of us can relate to her predicament at some level...
Not such extreme, utter desolation,
BUT being STUCK in a life destroying pattern of thinking and NOT doing.
Stuck in the problem, rather than risking moving into the solution.
Holding on tight to our self-centered belief
that God can't possibly forgive ME
And nothing can or will change.

And this morning, what are we told is Jesus' emphatic response
to that wrong thinking and inaction?
To that sin?

NO!!!
THAT WHAT GOD WANTS FOR YOU!
UNLESS YOU REPENT, YOU WILL PERISH.
TURN, AND LIVE.

Just as we don't know the conclusion of our Gospel story...
What happened to the fig tree...
I don't know the outcome of my caller's dilemma.

But I do know that God has not forsaken her
And is still trying to throw manure all around her
To loosen the hard packed soil of her heart and soul
So that she comes to a new awareness, a healing acceptance
Of the truth of God's love and forgiveness for her.

The Rev. Carole Johannsen gives us one last story and image.

"Some years ago I participated in a workshop led by Bishop Jack Spong. At one point, he described God's grace and love as a sink full of water, with the faucet still running, the water overflowing the sink, covering the floor and spilling out the door and down the stairs. All of our rational minds reacted to the destructiveness of that image, and one man spoke up and said, "Bishop Spong, wouldn't grace be better described as a sink full, even brim full with surface tension, rather than spilling over?"

“Absolutely not!” Jack Spong was emphatic. ‘The point is that grace (and hear the word forgiveness there) is beyond abundant. It is ‘holy waste.’ That’s how much grace and love (and forgiveness) pours out of God for us. We cannot *possibly* use it all. We cannot possibly limit it, turn it off, deplete it. Always there will be more.’”

So, what about the vinedresser and the tree?

Did the vinedresser have to cut the tree down for not bearing fruit?

Did the tree get a year’s reprieve?

And perhaps even another and maybe even one more.....

Did the tree eventually blossom and bear fruit?

What do you think?

What’s your ending for this story?

What is your ending for your story?