

Date: March 11, 2007

SUNDAY: Lent 3

SERMON: The Patient Gardener

Text(s): Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

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A recent Gallup poll showed that 80% of Americans claim that gardening is their principal hobby. I sometimes suspect that most of them live in Maine, but I'm sure that's not the case. It's just that gardening here is simply presumed to be something that everyone does, or should do. When we moved here nearly four years ago, it was suggested to us that while we perhaps had an excuse for not *being* gardeners, having lived in a fourth floor apartment on a busy street in the center of Paris for nearly a decade, we would have no excuse for not *becoming* gardeners, now that we lived in a normal house with a yard.

Well, we're starting to become gardeners, after a fashion, I guess, though we're still trying to figure out what will grow and what won't in a yard that doesn't get much sunlight because of all the tall trees that surround us. I'm sure we'll get there someday, maybe inspired by our own Jim Dodson's latest book *Beautiful Madness*, that came out last year, though I doubt I'll ever be a gardener with Jim's zest for it. I love to plant things and see them grow, but I am not particularly fond of pulling weeds, and I've been having only limited success in convincing my wife that pulling weeds is really her special gift.

The image of a gardener— a patient gardener at that— at first seemed to me to be a rather strange choice of an image to interpret Jesus' rather blunt statements about repentance that we find in our gospel lesson. But as I've reflected on both of our texts for today, I've been struck by how different a notion of repentance they contain compared with the notions that most of us carry around in our heads. Those notions, I suspect, were put there for many of us by well-meaning, but perhaps ill-informed parents or Sunday School teachers or pastors.

I suspect that many of us have difficulty with the notion of repentance because we

associate it somehow with guilt and wrongdoing and sin. All of those things we love to hate. All those things that in our emphasis on positive self-esteem we're ready to consign to the dustbin of the bad old days. Repentance is something we associate with the likes of Jonathan Edwards with his classic sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Or, for those who attended religious schools, with the list of do's and don'ts that regulated life and were enforced with discipline that threatened, not only punishment on the spot, but the wrath of God in the hereafter.

But the distorted pictures we've often been given of repentance shouldn't cause us to miss out on something so fundamental to our experience of a full and abundant life. Our texts today can help us reclaim that.

In our Gospel text, some people listening to Jesus' teaching, tell him the breaking news about the Roman governor Pontius Pilate's latest brutality— he has apparently had some Galileans suspected of being insurrectionists assassinated while they were offering religious sacrifices in the Temple in Jerusalem. This glimpse of Pilate's harsh overlordship is borne out by Roman imperial chroniclers. The emperor Tiberius actually fired Pilate and recalled him to Rome because his gratuitous use of violence and brutal suppression of even whispers of dissent were actually fomenting rebellion.

Part of the motivation of these folks in telling the news to Jesus may have been to warn him that, being a rather suspect Galilean himself, he might be better advised to avoid Jerusalem while Pilate was on the warpath. But some fifty years on from Jesus' time, Luke's focus is more on the theological implications of their remarks. Like many people, both then and now, they appear to have held to the common belief that when something bad happens to someone, it was because they had sinned against God in some way, even if it wasn't known to anyone else. After all, doesn't God reward goodness and punishes badness? That's not really such an ancient or outmoded way of thinking, is it? It's something of a natural way of thinking, because

that's the way, with our notions of justice, that we think that God should operate. Good things should happen to good people and bad things should only happen to bad people. And even though we may recognize the problematic nature of such thinking, down deep inside all of us, I suspect, at least some of germ of that notion resonates with us emotionally, if not intellectually. Our minds may grasp that this is bad theology, but our hearts often contradict our minds.

How many of us, or those within our family or friendship circles, have quit coming to church for a period of time or quit praying because of something bad that happened to them or someone close to them, and it appeared to them not to be deserved? Why should I believe in or trust a God who doesn't act at least as fairly or as justly as I'm capable of acting?

Or, sometimes, depending on our temperament or history, we turn it around. If something bad has happened to me, then maybe there's something really wrong with me. Bad things wouldn't happen to me if I didn't deserve them. I remember a dear old saint in one of my churches, who when she fell and broke her hip while in her late 80's, was convinced that she must have done something awful to merit such punishment from God, even though for the life of her, she couldn't figure out what it was. It took me a long time to convince her that perhaps it was just an accident and not an act of God that broke her hip, and that perhaps there was nothing especially wicked about her at all.

Jesus reacts to this common, but distorted way of thinking about sin and repentance in a way that neither his audience nor we might expect. *"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? Or the eighteen people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them? No, I tell you, unless you repent you will all likewise perish."*

Now here's where we have to pay

particularly close attention to what Luke is doing with this story. Too many sermons or Bible studies, stop right here and draw the conclusion that the principal point is we're all sinners and therefore, unless we repent, we're doomed." Now we can go along with the "we're all sinners" part; we know that. As someone, perhaps it was G. K. Chesterton, said, "The doctrine of sin is the only empirically verifiable doctrine in Christianity." But it's the other part of that I find troubling, the "unless you repent, you're all doomed," part, because it really portrays God in a way that is not at all in keeping with the best of biblical religion. It paints God in the colors of Jonathan Edwards's remote and vengeful deity, just waiting to pounce on us for "our manifold sins and wickednesses which we from time to time most grievously have committed" as the old prayer book put it so elegantly. It makes God into our popular image of Santa Claus as the one who's

*"making his list and checking it twice,"
gonna find out who's naughty and nice."*

Some of us spend a lifetime trying to free ourselves from the nagging sense of guilt such images of God saddle us with, and some of us never succeed, unless we jettison God altogether and just try to be good, self-aware people in some vague spiritual way.

But since neither Jesus nor Luke stops with that bald statement, *"Unless you repent you shall all likewise perish,"* we shouldn't either. The parable that follows this statement, if we continue on with it, brings us out at a very different place.

Here in the parable, there's a vineyard owner who planted a fig tree in the midst of his vineyard, presumably because he likes fresh figs. (I'm rather partial to them myself.) And he's obviously a wealthy enough man to have a hired gardener to take care of his grounds. So one day he says to his gardener, "This stupid tree. I've been waiting for three years for it to start producing fruit. I'm sick of waiting for it to

become fruitful. So get rid of it. It's just wasting the soil, stealing nutrients from the grapes. Cut it down."

Now our first inclination would be to see the vineyard owner as God, and this would make perfect sense if we imagine God as the rewarder of good and punisher of evil— as a sterner version of Santa Claus. But what would happen if, instead of seeing the vineyard owner as God, we saw the gardener as God? That would change the whole equation, wouldn't it? The gardener, rather than obediently following the owner's orders, pleads with the owner for a little more time to allow him to fertilize and cultivate and water the tree for another year and then see if it's still barren or whether it will have become fruitful.

As soon as we see God as the gardener, suddenly this whole business of repentance takes on an entirely new meaning. Repentance is not a spiritual "fire escape." It's not primarily about feeling sorry for the bad things we've done. If we've done bad things, then it's probably healthy to feel sorry, but that's not what repentance is about. Repentance means "turning around," or "changing direction," and it's not about feeling sorry or about making ourselves more acceptable to God or about somehow convincing God to forgive us. Repentance is about becoming fruitful. The gardener is the advocate for the unfruitful fig tree. He's not defending it for not bearing fruit, but he's advocating for more time so that he can invest more energy and labor into helping it become fruitful.

This leaves us with a far different picture of God, isn't it? This is not a God who is waiting for us to repent in order to forgive us for our sins; this is a God, who having already forgiven us from our sins, is waiting patiently, and working hard to help us become fruitful human beings—to become all that we were created to be. Repentance doesn't make us acceptable to God; it is the way we give ourselves over to the loving ministrations of the patient gardener. It's the way

we cooperate with God so that we can become in actuality what we already are in fact— bearers of God's own image, fully animated by the divine life. Or as St. Athanasius put it so succinctly, "*God became human that we might become divine.*"

The anonymous prophet we call II Isaiah gives us exactly the same picture of a God who generously and enthusiastically invites us to a feast of abundant and fruitful life.

"Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . .

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant."

Does that sound like a God who's waiting to crush us as though we were "loathsome spiders" to use Jonathan Edwards' infamous image? Does that sound like a God who punishes good people who don't deserve it and rewards bad people who do? Does that sound like a God who waits until we feel sorry enough for our sins that we're willing to grovel and beg before God magnanimously grants forgiveness? Hardly. Sounds to me like a God whose generosity outstrips economic good sense. Sounds to me like a lover's invitation rather than a judge's verdict. Sounds like a patient gardener who's willing to wait and invest more time and sweat and attentive care to coax a previously useless tree into becoming the fruitful tree it has the potential to become.

Now, does this mean that God does not take sin seriously? Or as St. Paul posed the same question, "Shall we sin more so that God will have even more opportunity to be gracious to us?" "God forbid!" was the way Paul answered his own question. Would we respond to a lover's wooings or a loving friend's entreaties that way? Of course not. But God's way of taking human sin seriously is to forgive it, thus breaking its destructive power over us. Of course, as we learn

in our own experience of forgiving those who wrong us in some way, forgiveness is very costly to the one doing the forgiving. To forgive someone means that we accept the cost of their wrongdoing and let them go free. If you steal my chickens and I forgive you, it's me who's still out the value of those chickens. Or let's not talk chickens, but something more real to us; if you betray my trust, and I forgive you, I bear the pain of that betrayal while absolving you from its consequences.

That is what we see when we look at the death of Jesus on the cross. We see there, the awful cost to God of God's reconciliation of the world. That's why we can never regard God's grace and mercy as cheap. The one who invites us to the feast of abundant life, to buy food without money and without price, the gardener who patiently pleads for more time, more loving care, more cultivation till the tree begins to bear good fruit, is the one who has already fully tasted the bitterness of the damage we are capable of inflicting on ourselves and others. Forgiveness is never easy or cheap to the one offering it; it is only free to the one receiving it.

I wonder if we can hear, as individuals, as a church, as a nation, that call to repentance that Jesus gives us, not as a call to grovel and beg for forgiveness, but as a call to accept the freedom already given us through God's generous forgiveness, and to allow that costly freedom to begin to transform us into that which we are capable of becoming? Will we open ourselves to the work of the patient gardener so that we can begin to bear the fruits of justice and of peace?