

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 7 MARCH 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 13: 1-9

"Lent – An Ongoing Lifestyle of Cultivating Creativity"

1. Responding to calamity

Our Lukan reading takes us further into our Lenten journey. It asks us, how do we respond to calamity, to human tragedy? Where do we "wander off" to deal with the blizzards of life, to use Parker J Palmer's metaphor?[\[1\]](#) And faced with the fragile, contingent nature of human existence, who is God for us, who are we to ourselves, and how do we assess others who experience tragedy?

Barbara Brown Taylor visited a distraught mother at a hospital when she was a hospital chaplain. The mother had just learnt that her five-year-old daughter had a large tumour "pressing on the girl's optic nerve".[\[2\]](#) She found the mother sitting "in the waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts" which she had smoked. The mother broke down, offering her response to this tragic discovery with the words:

It's my punishment for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so God made my baby sick.[\[3\]](#)

Barbara Brown Taylor goes on to say:

However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent or capricious one. ... If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to be the reason. At least that way she could get a grip on the catastrophe.[\[4\]](#)

This woman has been overwhelmed with the grief of her daughter's condition. Even more tragically, she has "wandered off" into fear and confusion, losing sense of herself, her soul in Parker Palmer language, and a belief in the paradoxical absence-presence of a compassionate God who had nothing to do with her daughter's health condition.

2. Jesus calls us to live an ongoing transformative life

In our reading from Luke, we find a Jesus who engages with people who are struggling to make sense of human and natural calamities. As we will see in a moment, Jesus is challenging his listeners to continually reflect on what kind of God they believe in, and, equally, who they are as persons who believe, that is, their identity.

And, he does this in a context of calling them to live a different life!

What does this mean? It seems, if we follow the traditional translations, that Jesus is challenging his hearers to repent.

But, if we hold his words together with the parable of the barren fig tree, we find a totally different

perspective emerging.

Brian Stoffregen^[5] reminds us, firstly, that the Greek word used, is *metanoeo*, and used in the present tense, implying continual action.

He translates the word to mean, “keep on repenting”, that is, to live in “a lifestyle of penitence”.^[6]

The word “repent” is not helpful to us with its overlay of moralistic and negative connotations. The Greek word holds other associations and together with the parable of the barren fig tree adds depth and content to the limitedness of the traditional English translation as repentance.

Joachim Jeremias enables us to see how the hearers of ancient times would have interpreted the fig tree parable:

The first three years of a fig-tree’s growth were allowed to elapse before its fruit became clean (Lev 19:23), hence six years had already passed since it was planted. It is thus hopelessly barren. ... A fig-tree absorbs a specially large amount of nourishment and hence deprives the surrounding vines of their needed sustenance. ... manuring a vineyard is not mentioned in any passage of the OT; moreover, as a matter of duty, the undemanding fig-tree does not need such care. Hence the gardener proposes to do something unusual, to take the last possible measures.... God’s mercy goes so far as to grant a reprieve from the sentence already pronounced... ^[7]

And, secondly, we need to realise, as Joseph Fitzmeyer suggests in his commentary of Luke, that the fig tree “is a symbol of the human being whose life is marked by unproductivity.”^[8]

What Jesus invites us to in our passage is not just a lifestyle of repentance. He is calling for something richer and deeper. He calls his listeners to turn away from living an unproductive, life based on naïve and stereotypical views about God, calamity and others. As Russel Pregeant says, disturbingly:

One can waste one’s life in many ways that do not appear on the surface to be destructive. To deplete our God-given creative energies on the merely trivial... ^[9]

Stated positively, Jesus is calling us to an ongoing lifestyle of cultivating creativity. Essential to this process is identifying the unproductive, within our own selves and our communities.

3. Creatively (de)constructing God

If we lament our times as God-disinterested, take time to have pity on Jesus’ time. Virulent unhealthy and tragic popular theologies spread their power everywhere. Such popular God-beliefs ranged from, God uses political tyrants such as Pilate to punish bad people, to a God who programmes towers and buildings to fall on people, for earthquakes to judge whole cities, to start storms and send diseases.

If God is the cause of all events, and in absolute control, this logic “leaves no room for human freedom or freedom in the created order”.^[10] And it does not reflect the God Jesus believed in.

Yet, such popular theology is alive and well today, as we saw in the story of the mother who felt God punished her daughter because the mother smoked too much! As Barbara Brown Taylor

deconstructs this notion, “It gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics”.[\[11\]](#)

In re-constructing the God of Jesus, we need to first de-construct bad theology.

So, firstly, to begin with this deconstructive comment: the God of Jesus does not exercise complete control; nor is this God a coercive and distant being.

Then, constructively, yet paradoxically: God, however, is active in the world. Yet, active as a partner, persuasive and luring the good, the true and the beautiful.

4. An ongoing lifestyle of cultivating creativity.

So, what I am suggesting about Lent is an ongoing lifestyle of cultivating creativity. Again, I want to draw your attention to the Enneagram as a creative instrument to enable this process of transformation.

To use the words of Barbara Brown Taylor because she touches the core of what I am trying to say:

While Jesus does not honor their illusion that they can protect themselves in this way, he does seem to honor the vulnerability that their fright has opened up in them. It is not a bad thing for them to feel the full fragility of their lives. It is not a bad thing for them to count their breaths in the dark -- not if it makes them turn toward the light.

It is that turning he wants for them, which is why he tweaks their fear. Don't worry about Pilate and all the other things that can come crashing down on your heads, he tells them. Terrible things happen, and you are not always to blame. But don't let that stop you from doing what you are doing. That torn place your fear has opened up inside of you is a holy place. Look around while you are there. Pay attention to what you feel. It may hurt you to stay there and it may hurt you to see, but it is not the kind of hurt that leads to death. It is the kind that leads to life.

Richard Rohr in his book, *Discovering the Enneagram*, writes that we need to continually practise self-discovery through self-communion and in this way to process the torn parts and places of our lives. This he understands as redemption from the false self (and false notions of God and others) as a gift of God's grace.

Paul... formulates this insoluble paradox of human struggle and God's grace in this way: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. It is God, for his own loving purpose, who puts both the will and the action into you”. (Philippians 2: 12-13)[\[12\]](#)

The metaphor, *to work out our own salvation*, a practice both of trusting in the hidden yet present grace of God and self-discovery via self-communion, is to ensure we do not “wander off”, as Parker J Palmer names it.

He sets that notion within a powerful parable, from his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, in which he invites us to enter a journey toward an undivided life:

There was a time when farmers on the Great Plains, at the first sign of a blizzard, would run a rope from the back door out to the barn. They all knew stories of people who had

wandered off and been frozen to death, having lost sight of home in a whiteout while still in their own backyards.^[13]

We all need “ropes” to hold us firm in life, to keep us from “wandering off” under the spell of bad self-images produced when we were children, or popular theologies about God that misrepresent the mystery of God’s absence-presence in the world, such as the woman whose daughter had a brain tumour.

“Ropes” can be good friends who provide us with respectful mutuality.

And, as I stressed in Lent One, the Enneagram (setting us in one of 9 personality types which we express uniquely) is one powerful depth instrument that sets out our way of thinking, feeling and acting; an instrument that has pulled me out of many “wanderings”!

I commend it to you. Some of us at St Aidan’s may begin sessions on the Enneagram to cultivate a life of self-awareness, greater spaciousness, and creativity.

[1] Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*, p1.

[2] Barbara Brown Taylor, Life-Giving Fear, *The Christian Century*, March 4, 1999, p229.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Brian Stoffregen, Lent 3, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke13x1.htm>

[6] *Op cit.*

[7] Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp 170f, found in: Brian Stoffregen, Lent 3, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke13x1.htm>

[8] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 28A, found in: Russell Pregeant, <http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-03-07-Lent.shtml>

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] Alan Culpepper, “Luke” in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, 270, found in: Russell Peagent, *Ibid.*

[11] *Op Cit.*

[12] Richard Rohr, xiv

[13] Parker J Palmer, p1.