

Christ Collides with Condemnation

Lent II

Scripture: Luke 13:1-9, 31-35 (NRSVUE)

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Luke 13 begins with a jarring scene – like a gruesome opening sequence in a horror movie to catch our attention and put us on edge. We encounter a crowd of people telling Jesus about Pilate slaughtering a group of Galileans who were apparently sacrificing in the Temple in Jerusalem. According to the gossip, Pilate had not only slaughtered the Galilean pilgrims but mixed their blood with the blood of their sacrificial animals.

We don't know why Pilate, the Judean governor, meted out this brutal act of justice, but we can surmise something about the crowd that is talking with Jesus. They are most likely southern Judean Jews, those living in and around the holy city of Jerusalem. These southern Jews look down on the northern Galilean Jews. The Galileans have a reputation for being less strict in their observance of the law and for mingling with the non-Jewish Gentile cultures that live in their region. It is interesting to note that Jesus himself grew up in Galilee and, throughout the gospels, we hear prejudicial remarks towards him because of this. For example, John 7:41 says: "How can the Messiah come from *Galilee*?" It's hard for the southern Jews to imagine that a Messiah could possibly emerge from this second-class population.

Our theme for Lent is "Christ Collides." Each week explores a different way that Christ's ministry and Christ's way of being collides with the ways of the world. The focus for this second week of Lent is *Christ Collides with Condemnation*. The Galileans are no strangers to condemnation. The southern Judeans have written them off and Pilate has condemned some of them to death in this story. Of course, Pilate's condemnation is more violent and extreme but writing someone off because of their social status is another form of condemnation. It is a dismissal of an entire person or an entire group because of their identity.

Social psychology has given us the term “fundamental attribution error”: a type of cognitive bias. This error comes to mind when I think about condemnation. Let me give you a scenario to explain this term. Let’s say that you have been working in a particular job for many years, so you have a certain level of mastery over your tasks. Your organization hires someone new and they come to you, with some frequency, with questions about how things work.

One morning, you come to work feeling out of sorts. First, you are preoccupied by the argument you had with your teenager the night before. Second, traffic was bad, so you were late for work. And, third, you missed breakfast, so you are “hangry” (hunger + anger = hanger). You’re not off to a good start, mood-wise. Your new colleague comes to you with a question and you don’t show your usual level of patience as you snap at her and say: “can’t you just figure things out for yourself??!” You later reflect back on this exchange and feel badly about snapping, but you ultimately give yourself a pass because of the external circumstances that gave rise to your behaviour: argument with teenager, bad traffic, hanger. You believe that you are only partially accountable for your actions because of these external circumstances and you convince yourself that your behaviour is *out of character. It is not WHO you ARE.*

Now turn the tables. YOU are the new colleague who is learning and a senior colleague snaps at you. You probably won’t consider the unknown circumstances that contributed to their behaviour. And you will probably be tempted to hold them fully accountable for this behaviour because you presume that this is who they ARE based on the negative impact their actions have on you. They must be a reactive, impatient, unhelpful person. That is their nature. In other words, we excuse ourselves due to the external factors influencing our actions while we condemn others, attributing their actions to their bad character. Herein lies the fundamental attribution error.

Mediator Betty Pries, in her book *The Space Between Us*, talks about how easy it is to become “entrenched” in our views of others; how quickly our “assumptions regarding the other and the other’s intentions are given the status of objective truth.”¹ If someone’s behaviour impacts us negatively, we tend to suspect that that person must have intended to harm us and then we convince ourselves that these

¹ p. 34

suspicions are truth. When we make this decision about someone, our assumptions become entrenched and we find ways to justify them. From her many years of experience mediating conflicts, Pries concludes that “enough self-justification [leads us] to support actions that humiliate, punish, harm, or dehumanize the other.”²

Consider the gossip of the crowd when they approach Jesus about the slaughter of the Galileans. Jesus immediately calls them out on the assumptions that they’re making. He asks them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way [that] they were worse sinners?” Then he compares their deaths to the deaths of 18 people who were killed in a freak accident. Christ collides with the assumption that those who are visited by tragedy somehow deserve it more than others.

And, yet, in this same passage, Jesus also warns the crowd to repent or they will perish. Is there a contradiction here? First Jesus tells his listeners that the Galileans didn’t deserve to die any more than anyone else, then he says that *everyone* should repent or they will die, not just the Galileans. Repent or perish. I would like to unpack these two daunting words.

The word “repent” can mean to have remorse for one’s actions. It also means to “turn away from” sin; to change one’s ways that run counter to God’s will for us. When we repent and turn away from sin, we *re*-turn towards God. We say “no” to sin and “yes” to God’s will.

The Hebrew word *teshuvah* means to re-turn to God after turning away from God in sin. In the Old Testament, this purification from sin would happen temporarily with animal sacrifice in the Temple. But this is never complete. The prophet Hosea says: “For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings (6:6). And Psalm 51 says: “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise (16-17). Repentance is not simply a ritual act like the sacrifice of an animal, but a total transformation of the heart, a transformation of the way we look at and think about

² *ibid.*

the world in which we participate, and the way we treat ourselves, our neighbours and our enemies.

In our passage from Luke, Jesus states that if we do not repent fully, we will perish. I had never really thought much about the word “perish” before preparing for today’s sermon. I just always took it to mean “to die.” But it has a much more complex meaning. It isn’t simply a synonym of physical death. It has a spiritual dimension. It also means to be lost or ruined or separated from God. To repent and perish, then, can be taken to mean: if you don’t become transformed in heart, mind and deed, you will experience loss, ruination and separation from God.

We can be lost or separated from God temporarily. Maybe we are procrastinating and resisting change like St. Augustine on the cusp of conversion who said: “Lord make me pure, but just not yet.” Maybe we are holding onto destructive patterns of behaviour out of fear or anger or maybe we are holding onto grudges and condemnatory judgments of others because we are not willing to let go and forgive. This makes me think of a conversation I had with my son Christof who was annoyed with one of his classmates. In my best reprimanding mom voice, I started to respond to his complaints with: “Christof...” He cut me off before I could finish and said: “Mom, if you tell me to shift judgment to curiosity, I’m out of here.” I guess he’d been paying attention!

Repent or perish is a frightening threat. It has an air of finality. A looming due date. But God is patient with us. God tells us that nothing can separate us from God’s love. We can reject that love and experience the agonizing separation that comes with this rejection, but God will welcome us back when we say “no” to sin and “yes” to God and to our true selves. When we say “yes” to God and to ourselves, we come out of the shadows and into the light.

After Jesus’ comments on repentance, he tells the people a parable about a fig tree. Before we analyze this parable, I want to share something interesting about figs with you that I learned only recently.

Figs are not exactly a fruit in the traditional sense, but an inverted flower. The interior of each fig develops from hundreds of individual fruiting flowers. And these inverted flowers are pollinated from the inside by fig wasps who burrow into the fruit. Their bodies are then broken down by enzymes produced by the fig and

incorporated into the flesh of the flower, so don't worry, you're not going to find a wasp carcass when you eat a fig. However, you could think of eating figs as an act of revenge against wasps in general if you have ever been stung.

So what do these fascinating flower fruits have to do with condemnation? Why does Jesus tell the parable of the fig tree right after he warns the crowd that they must all repent or perish? Figs seem like a real jump in topic, but when we read closely, I think there is an interesting connection. The parable reads:

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 man working the vineyard, "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?" [The gardener] replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down" (Luke 13:6-9).

This parable appears only in Luke, but Matthew and Mark also mention Jesus cursing a fig tree for not bearing fruit. Jesus was probably hangry when he did that.

In the Luke passage, the fig tree has been given a chance to bear fruit for three years without any luck, but the gardener asks for patience for an additional year instead of condemnation which would result in the final destruction of the fig tree. Like many of the parables, this parable uses images of everyday life to say something about the "Kingdom" of God. We can condemn, dismiss, or cancel someone who has not yet repented or born spiritual fruit, but God reminds us that God is patient and will continue to nurture us and nudge us in the right direction. God hasn't given up on us. The fig is a perfect image of an invisible kingdom being pollinated and transformed from within. We may not be able to observe what's happening within, but it is happening nonetheless. This should give us pause the next time we make assumptions about people based on lack of knowledge.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk talks about something similar to this parable, but instead of figs, he talks about lettuce. He writes:

When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce, you look into the reasons it is not doing well. It may need more fertilizer, or more water or less sun...If we have problems with our friends or our family, we [tend] to blame

*the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well like the lettuce.*³

In conclusion, perhaps the fruitless fig tree and the languishing lettuce have not been given the right conditions in which to thrive. It is the same with people. We all need the nutrient-rich soil, water and sunlight of community to support us on our quest to re-turn to God and say “no” to sin. I encourage you to avoid condemnation in light of the parable we heard today. Always give people one more year, the way God the gardener always gives us one more year. Amen.

³ From *Peace is Every Step*.