

3 Lent C February 28, 2016

Change the Mind

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When I met my friend Faith, I had no idea she was suffering, but she was. She was suffering from shame and a broken heart. Unbeknownst to me, her marriage of over 20 years had ended when her husband asked for a divorce. Although she had tried to get him to agree to counselling, he was set on leaving her for another woman. When I met my friend, she was learning to live as a divorced woman. While mourning the loss of her husband and marriage, she was also struggling with the shame of admitting her marriage had failed, and blamed herself.

After we had gotten to know each other, my friend began to heal and in her healing forgave her ex-husband and herself, and in that that act of forgiveness I saw a significant change in my friend. Her focus stopped being on what went wrong with her marriage and she began to embrace new opportunities and she began listening more to God. She felt called to live life to its fullest instead of being convinced life for her was over because of her failed marriage.

However, when she went to her parish priest for counsel, especially counsel on how she could find ways to meet single men her age who shared her values, her priest scowled at her and asked what her grandchildren would think about their grandmother going on a date. My friend was taken aback by this counsel, it seemed her priest was far more interested in keeping her in a place of shame and accepting a life where she felt alone. My friend replied by saying she hoped her grandchildren would see her dating as evidence that we can always try again, love again.

My friend did try again, and with the help of an internet dating site she meet a man, fell in love him with and he fell in love with her. During that time she also felt God call her to the diaconate, and pursued that call. After her ordination I saw my friend radiate a love and life that is rare and inspiring. She loved serving a parish in Wisconsin, loved her job, loved the man in her life, and of course she still loved her children and grandchildren. After she changed her mind about what life meant for her after her divorce, my friend found God's love and lived it fully. No more so than when she died from brain cancer, and those of us who love her

watched her face a tragic death with grace and faith. I am grateful for her powerful witness and I am so glad she didn't listen to her priest.

It certainly wasn't the only time someone from the institutional church had placed shame, blame or judgment on someone for a loss or tragic event. We see this kind of thing on a larger scale when a minister blames natural disasters or disease or some other tragedy on a group of people, insisting that those tragedies were God's judgment and punishment on humanity for a group of people the minister doesn't like or agree with. It's an old misconception that tries to answer the question of why there is suffering and injustice in the world or why God would allow suffering or acts of injustice by insisting God must be punishing people for some bad thing they have done.

This misconception is so old, it showed up in our Gospel reading where some people told Jesus about an act of injustice where a group of religious people were brutally killed while in the act of worship. Think of how the man who killed the church members at Mother Emmanuel Church in Charleston's crime was more heinous because it took place in a church during Bible study, the event in the Gospel was sort of like that. It was a disturbing tragedy, and perhaps also raises the question of why would God allow it to happen to the faithful.

Jesus' response is interesting in that he didn't blame anyone, which might be what we are used to after a tragedy occurs. We like to know who is to blame. But not Jesus. He didn't blame Pilate. He didn't blame the worshipers, and he didn't blame God, which, it could be said, really is what we are saying in a back handed way when we say a tragedy was God punishing someone or a group of people. Instead of blaming, Jesus simply stated the need to repent.

That word repent is a word we tend to gloss over in the Bible. It appears frequently in both the Old and New Testaments, and it is one of Jesus' primary messages. It unfortunately might bring to mind images of people walking along busy roads with the word written on a piece of cardboard, which might be why we gloss over it and it doesn't help us understand what Jesus was calling the people who spoke to him in today's Gospel and us to do.

The word repent in most dictionaries and Bible dictionaries is defined as meaning to feel remorse or sorry for one's actions so much that one is willing to change. It could be said that repent means to change. In Greek, the word translated repent is metanoia, which literally translates as to change the mind. I like that definition because I believe that is getting closer to what Jesus' calling to

us is about. To change one's mind is a pretty significant change. When we change our mind it usually means we make lots of other changes to reflect that change. Like my friend Faith who changed her mind about what her life could be like after her divorce. Once she understood God didn't love her any less, that God wasn't punishing her, she changed, she let go of shame, and she was able to embrace the love of God and live that love in powerful ways. She changed her behaviors, and grew closer to God and God's calling. Instead of being bitter she loved better, lived better, and helped many of us along the way.

What might Jesus be asking us to change our minds about in today's Gospel? Maybe the answer goes all the way back to the beginning, to the story of the Garden in Genesis. In the adult forum this month, we've been studying the story of Creation, especially the part about Adam and Eve and what happened after they ate the forbidden fruit. One of the things we've discovered is there are some details about that story we thought we knew but aren't really true. For example, it was commonly accepted that when confronted by God Adam blamed the woman Eve for his eating the forbidden fruit. However, when we examined the text itself we saw Adam did far worse, he blamed God. And the consequence of that act has been that humans continue to push God away by defining God as angry, mean, and judgmental. So, when faced with a tragedy we cannot explain or emotionally handle, it is part of our nature to turn to God not for love but with blame.

The parable Jesus told in today's Gospel shows us something different when a fruitless tree was not cut out of the vineyard, but given another chance and more time at life. Whether we see God as the owner or the gardener, the tree still got spared. Its fruitlessness was not punished nor was it celebrated, it was just given more time, love and life. Maybe this parable, which is often called the parable of second chances, is Jesus way of saying that tragedies are not God's judgment of wrongdoing and that being free from suffering is not a sign of God's blessing. Maybe Jesus' parable is saying God's judgment hasn't happened or maybe Jesus is saying God's judgment isn't violence or death. God's judgment is life and love.

While the notion of cutting down or killing an unfruitful tree makes good economic sense, it doesn't necessarily express God's economy as Jesus showed us where there is enough for all, including enough time and life. Which might make us wonder who the landowner so eager to cut the tree down might really be.

Instead of seeing God as the angry punishment behind tragedies, Jesus is calling us to change our minds about God, and about our relationship with God. Instead of pushing God away, we can change our mind, and turn toward God. While this mindset won't give us any answers about why tragic things happen whether it is losing a friend too soon, a relationship that didn't work, or natural disasters or acts of violent terrorism, but it certainly gives us a deep challenge this Sunday in Lent.

Remember, today's Gospel event took place while Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, and we all know what is going to happen to him there. But maybe Jesus' parable is not only a response to the question of suffering, maybe Jesus parable is pointing us to the cross. When we look at the cross with the understanding that God's judgment isn't the violence or death we might think it should be, that means Jesus being nailed to the cross isn't God's judgment. It is the judgment of those who act out of fear, and anger and violence. Human judgment. God's judgement is what happened three days later when God showed God's judgment is not death, God's judgment is life and love.

That is where the deep challenge comes in. If God's judgment isn't death, but life and love, what does that mean for us? How could believing in God's judgment being life and love change how we look at our own past mistakes, our sins, or even our pain? How could believing God's judgment is life and love reflect on how we treat people, especially people who hurt us or let us down? Remember my friend Faith? She eventually had to leave her parish because the people there didn't believe she should have changed, they believed she should have been punished for her failed marriage by not having the chance to be ordained a deacon or to find love again. It was a difficult decision for her, but my friend found another Episcopal parish where she was judged differently, where she was supported in living new life. My friend's experience and today's Gospel could challenge us to repent, to change our minds. This kind of a change might be very difficult, because it might sound contrary to what we've been taught. Some might find it frightening. But even to reflect on it is to walk awhile with Jesus this season of Lent toward the events of Holy Week and Easter, where we will see a lot of violence and death and life and love. Imagine all the new life we might discover if we embrace such a change of mind.