

3 Lent C March 24, 2019

Repentance, Reflection, and Resurrection in Lent

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It took more than 40 days for writer and teacher Rachel Howard to gain a deeper understanding of Lent, but when she did, it was a beautiful and meaningful moment of repentance. In a recent article she wrote that appeared in the Sunday New York Times titled: A Letter of Recommendation for Lent, Rachel Howard wrote about how she was welcomed into an Episcopal parish at the age of 25 and of the many seasons of Lent she participated in; how she noticed the starkness of the sanctuary, what she called the “strange theater” of removing alleluias and bells until the Great Vigil of Easter. How she gave up things like chocolate and then graduated to learning to fast from things far more destructive to her soul like the emotional neediness that had damaged many personal relationships and as a result grew spiritually healthier. But it wasn’t until she divorced her first husband, she writes, that she really began to understand what the season of Lent has to offer. It took her three seasons, 120 days of Lent, to let go of her defensiveness around her divorce and use those days to reflect on the divorce – on what happened and the truth she was hiding from - instead of deflecting the shame and guilt she felt. That is how she came to the communion rail in that Episcopal Church, confessing to a priest. The priest had Rachel name the sin, then after completing the ritual of confession, the priest pronounced not just forgiveness, but absolution, explaining to Rachel she had to leave the sin behind. As she walked out of the church that day, Rachel said she felt different, she knew she was a changed person, and wasn’t just going to work on having healthier relationships but was going in a completely different direction in her life. What Rachel described in her lovely article is what Jesus was talking about in today’s Gospel lesson: repentance.

To me, repentance seems to be one of those religious concepts that gets co-opted by popular culture, self-help books, and the entertainment industry who reduce repentance to simply feeling bad about a past action, recognizing a mistake, and promising to do better next time. But that is not what Jesus was asking for in today’s Gospel. Jesus was referring to something that goes deeper than recognizing where things went wrong. When Jesus talked about repenting, what he was talking about was a reorientation, changing from going in one direction to going in another. In other words: Repentance isn’t the equivalent to being lost and recalculating the directions on the GPS to get you where you want to go. Repentance is deciding to completely change the destination. It’s a big choice and a big change that requires some serious thought, prayer and reflection, which is probably why we have been given this reading from Luke’s Gospel today, as it fits well in the season of Lent which the church sets aside for such practices.

When we look at today's Gospel reading, we might miss Jesus' emphasis on repentance because we might be quite taken by the first part of the Gospel where people asked Jesus about a tragedy: the violence in a public place of worship. This part might get our attention because we hear about similar tragedies on a far too frequent basis; so much so that I have friends who tell me they are beginning to feel overwhelmed and hopeless. They are giving up hope that the world will ever be a place of welcome for all people. It's all going to hell in a handbasket, they exclaim. It's just too impossibly hard to change things. And maybe that is what the people brought to Jesus in today's Gospel, or maybe it was the question of why bad things happen to good people. Which is probably not a question to answer as much as it is a reality we need to deal with: tragedies are not deserved but they are a part of life.

Scholars and theologians tell us that the author of Luke was an apocalyptic writer, and therefore the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts of the Apostles in the Bible are intended to draw attention to the brokenness of the world we live in and the reality that God's Kingdom is breaking into that brokenness bit by bit and bringing healing and wholeness. The brokenness won't last forever, God's Love will. That change of direction, from focusing on the broken to the ways God is Present was the reorientation the author of Luke was advocating for. Repentance therefore means turning away from the practices, assumptions and attitudes of the brokenness of the world and move in the direction of the values and practices of God's Kingdom. Things like practicing forgiveness instead of judgment, empathy instead of punishment, hope instead of fearful despair, resilience instead of giving up, and as Rachel Howard practiced: reflection instead of deflection.

When terrible things or tragedies happen, whether they happen to us personally or not, it can be tempting to deflect all the feelings those tragedies bring out in us onto others. That's where blame happens. Or making assumptions about people and places we don't know. That's when you hear nonsense like tragedy is punishment. That's the broken way of thinking. But in today's Gospel Jesus invites those listening to him then and today to go a completely different direction. To respond with empathy, to reflect on what can and cannot be done, and focus on what we can do, and more importantly, what God is calling us to do.

That is where the parable of the fruitless fig tree comes in. This parable only appears in Luke's Gospel and has been interpreted in many different ways: One is the gardener is Jesus negotiating with the God the landowner who is quickly losing patience in the people of Israel the fig tree for their lack of faithfulness or fruit production. Others say the impatient landowner sounds more like us human beings, and Jesus is showing us God's patient nature of mercy, who does not bring calamity as

punishment but instead provides all that God can in the never-ending hope that things will change for the fruitless tree, which could possibly be the modern church in its struggles to be faithful and produce new disciples.

Depending on where you are spiritually or emotionally this Lent, any one of those interpretations might speak to you, and might be what you need to hear. That is good and I hope you heard what you needed. These interpretations, however, do gloss over the end of the parable, where the fruitless fig tree has been given a limited time to change its ways, which may be worth some attention. The problem with the fig tree isn't that it isn't growing larger. The problem with the fig tree is it has not produced fruit. It hasn't done anything wrong as much as it has not done nothing. So, we might then ask, what is the equivalent of figs or fruit in this parable, or, what might be what we confess when we mention the "things left undone" in our corporate confession. What does Jesus want from the tree? He's already given the answer in our Gospel: he wants folks to change their destination, he wants reorientation, he wants repentance.

Jesus wants reflection instead of deflection, forgiveness instead of punishment, courageous hope instead of pessimistic despair, truth instead of gossip, and the openness to being willing to change our destination, as a parish, as a person, as a family, as a community, from that which reflects selfish power and prestige to becoming the beloved community of God's Kingdom. These changes are not easy to make, and can take time, perhaps that is also something we can take comfort from in the parable in today's Gospel. Jesus knows repentance takes time and is giving us time. Rachel Howard's beautiful experience of repentance certainly took time, more than just one season of Lent.

But that deadline is still there. And that is okay. As followers of Jesus such deadlines do not need to bring fear or despair. Because Lent is a season that brings us to another season, the season of Resurrection. And the message of Resurrection is death is not an end, it is the new beginning. Not so things can continue the way they did, but so that life can go in a different direction. Resurrection life is the abundant life Jesus gives and began, life that embodies all the stuff of the Love of God. Resurrection life is Jesus' destination. And if we are following Jesus, then it can be ours too. When we reflect on the fig tree in Resurrection light, then once it's been given its time, and everything that could be done for it has been done, it is okay to cut it down if it still doesn't give fruit, for that may be the way it can find the resurrection life Jesus wants for us to receive and embody. Which means it can be okay for some things to end, those endings can be sad, but they can also be ways for repentance, reorientation toward resurrection life to be made possible. Going in a new direction, after all, means not going in the former, or ending the former direction. The holy possibility of change is one place we can find peace and hope.

The need for hope is great. Rachel Howard's article on Lent gives me hope, because it embodies the reality that repentance is possible and is evidence that sometimes churches can be places of healing and providing what people need to receive God's love and courage to change direction, to become a bit closer to the purpose God has for them. It can and does really happen. It's a bit of resurrection of life right here in the middle of Lent, and that can be some healing hope for us all.