

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Online Bible Study Discussion Starter
Monday, March 5, 2007

Lesser to Greater

Stimulus:

The lectionary's gospel lesson for Sunday, March 11 is **Luke 13:1-9**, the second part of which is the parable of the unproductive fig tree. **Luke 13:6-9** reads (in NRSV):

6. Then he [Jesus] told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.
7. So he said to the gardener, "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?"
8. He replied, "Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.
9. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' "

I had begun thinking about my next sermon by reflecting on the video Michele had showed the youth group on this past weekend's sleep-over (a misnomer) in Bonham Hall. The subject was bullying, and the video presented an intervention program that seems to be having success in schools across the United States and Canada. One of the devices used to get the kids talking is this sentence they are asked to complete: "If you knew me, you'd know" What the kids soon discover is they've all been bullied, teased, or picked on – including the bullies themselves - and all have problems and hurts.

That line of thought led me quickly to Psalm 139 in which the psalmist speaks at length of how well God knows him, through and through. Next, I thought of the final verses of First Corinthians 13: "Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, **even as I have been fully known**" [emphasis mine]. But does this idea relate to the lectionary lesson?

The mistake, I think, in interpreting the parable of the barren fig tree is assuming an allegorical "this represents that" connection with God and human life. For example, we might say, "The fig tree is either Israel or the church or else the individual Jew or Christian." God expects fruit – that is, results of God's own grace in the lives of the people. The owner or farmer is said to represent God, and the gardener who pleads for sparing the fig tree for one more year represents Jesus.

There are two problems with this manner of interpretation. First, Jesus' parables are not allegories. Second, such a one-to-one correspondence changes the force and meaning of the parable. It makes God judgmental and angry, Jesus more understanding and compassionate, but only for one more year! Then, God will lower the boom.

Jesus, however, often employs a teaching device we now call “the argument from lesser to greater,” as I have mentioned before. If a gardener can be expected to care enough about a mere fig tree to make a case before his employer and then tend the plant for a year, how much more can we expect God to be patient with people? If a plant is worth that much, is a person not worth far more? Why does God not simply judge the wicked and the righteous and get it done? The answer reveals to us that such vindictive justice is not God’s desire. As the Bible bears witness in many places, God’s desire is to redeem the lost and sinful, not to punish or destroy them.

Normative people (and the normative side of each of us) want justice done according to what each person deserves. God is at odds with that desire in us. God wants redemption, which is God’s kind of justice.

God’s patience, however, is not benignly unconcerned with the quality of human life and our treatment of each other. God still wants the fruit – that is, the responses to grace that will make us new people living life in God’s way. It’s not “anything goes” with God. The same prophet (Ezekiel) who tells us God’s position on retribution is, “I take no pleasure in the death of any person,” also tells us God intends to replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh and to give us a new spirit. God is patient but never stops wanting real change.

So, in the first part of Luke 13:1-9, Jesus tells us that, no, God does not push a tower onto people because they are worse sinners than others, but we all need to repent, which means “turn” to God and “turn away” from life that is godless and self-serving. God is patient, not indulgent, and there is a huge difference. Patience works toward change. Indulgence tolerates everything without working toward change.

Thought questions:

1. How many of Jesus’ parables can we recall that make better sense when we look at them through the interpretative lens of the argument from lesser to greater?
2. In our Christian rush to judgment upon all things earthly, have we failed to understand both the Creator’s love for the creation and the reason for the Son’s Incarnation?
3. Can we discern the difference between grace and mere indulgence of people and tolerance of the wrong in life?
4. In our adult forum yesterday, one of the flaws in thinking we heard identified by cognitive therapists was “should” thinking – that is, refusing to deal realistically with the actual conditions of life because they are not as we think they “should be.” If God would meet us only where we should be, we would have no hope, because God would never meet us at all except in judgment. Yet, people who hold out strongly for “should thinking” refuse to see dealing with actual conditions as anything but a shameful compromise. They tend to want virtue rewarded and to despise grace. There is some “should thinking” in all of us. How can we deal with it and with ourselves? And, is there a sense in which we need to keep one eye on “what should be”? Or does God have no goal in mind except to understand us as we are?