

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles

Third Sunday in Lent – February 28, 2016

Theme for Lent: “Plotting the Resurrection”

Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 13:1-9

REFLECTION

**“Personality begins where comparison leaves off.
Be unique. Be memorable. Be confident. Be proud.”**

— Shannon L. Alder, inspirational author

Better or Worse

When the Gospel of John was written, it was believed that if you suffered – either at the hands of another human or through natural causes – it was G-d’s response to your sinfulness. The amount of suffering indicated the amount of sinfulness. So to compare your own suffering to that of someone else – was to figure out who was a better or worse person.

It’s only been in the last century of psychological study and therapeutic practice that we have begun to disconnect these two things and retrain our brains to understand that suffering just happens. There is rarely a direct connection between sinfulness and suffering (unless one is capable of profound and painful feelings of guilt – or we get caught committing our crime and are served an appropriate punishment). To compare our suffering to that of others is pointless. Pain is pain and we all feel it differently.

“Repent or Perish” is no longer a literal warning. Just as the parable in our text is not really about a fig tree – it’s a metaphor for the spiritual condition of Israel. And even at her worst – appearing dead and lifeless – G-d is going to give Israel a chance to resurrect herself and be the spiritual gem that she is capable of being. And Jesus is going to help – with a lot of fertilizer (aka sheep dung) and care.

So the text-message for today seems to be two metaphorical memes from the past:

Repent or Suffer-and Die

* and *

Get your s**t together people – this is your last chance!

But I want to push us to the next cognitive step – to hear the mercy offered in the parable that can lead us out of the self-loathing / self-lauding extremes that Christianity tends to engender.

The tree may appear to be past saving – but it is offered another chance and a loving gardener to help it come back to life. That’s mercy for you. We are not only NOT a lost cause (individually or as a country) – but we don’t have to resurrect ourselves alone. G-d’s “recreative energy” is available to us when we are ready to access it. And when we do, the garbage of our lives can become fertilizer which makes us better people and a better nation. That’s the real miracle.

And the gift of modern psychology (which has a heavy influence on progressive theology) is that we don’t have to blame ourselves for pain and suffering that just happens. We know full well that innocent people can die in falling buildings – and seriously flawed people can be famous and make lots of money and run for president and maybe even win. Worthiness has nothing to do with it.

Therefore, comparing ourselves to others – coming to conclusions about who we are and how worthy we are – by placing ourselves next to people we consider better or worse than ourselves – is pointless – even destructive. And that goes for nations as well as individuals.

I actually remember being in high school. Those were some of the best years of my life – okay, and some of the worst. The thing that stands out for me was the realization that I would never be like most of the other kids at my high school. I wasn’t the cheerleader type and I wasn’t good at sports. I was okay at student government, loved English class and excelled at being different. So I capitalized on that – finding other outliers who didn’t fit in and forming our own small community of weirdos who were no better or worse than anyone else – but definitely not normal – whatever that meant at the time.

There was some amount of teasing, bullying and suffering involved with that. So there was a certain amount of self-protection I had to develop – some of which turned into personality quirks – some of which needed dismantling in therapy. But needing therapy is not unique – and there are a few who probably need to look into getting some. The best choice I ever made was to quit trying to be like other people who seemed better than me. It allowed me to focus on being a better “Anne” – whoever that was – and is.

And being a better self doesn't necessarily mean less suffering – because that just happens – whether we are good or bad, worthy or unworthy. Being a better self means measuring oneself against one's own code, one's own set of values and behavior expectations. And the closer I come to living up to my own code – the better I feel about myself. The code can use some tweaking at times – but it's a pretty good code I must say. And it vaguely resembles some "Christian" codes I've read about.

There is an article going around online about how we must stop describing the United States as a "Christian Nation." There are any number of reasons to stop that. But the most recent one is that our nation is having difficulty living up to any "Christian" set of values – the values, for instance, of radical inclusion of the foreigner and outcast, compassion for the destitute and unlucky, charity for the needy and mercy for the prodigal, love for the unlovable and access to basic human rights for all.

The American personality as experienced by "the world" is rather crass and hateful, vengeful and militaristic, empire-ish and self-absorbed. This so-called "Greatest Nation in the World" isn't so much if we compare ourselves to other nations that are actually living up to their value systems.

Michael Moore has apparently made this case in his latest film. **Variety** tells us that:
...this impassioned and unruly provocateur returns to further dismantle the myth of American supremacy with renewed optimism and sharpened comic instincts in **"Where to Invade Next,"** an impishly entertaining, career-summarizing polemic bent on demonstrating how other countries around the world — with their happy workers, superior schools, humane prisons, healthy sexual attitudes and fully empowered women — are putting U.S. progress to shame.
...Moore decides to brand himself a new kind of American invader, a one-man conquering army who will travel to foreign nations not to destroy their villages and enslave their citizens, but rather to plunder their way of life — to claim their utopian ideals and hold them up as examples for the U.S. to learn from.
...If there's a throughline here, it's the firm conviction that **we are human beings rather than human doings,** and that the ever-present stigma of "socialism" has kept too many Americans from grasping that a good education, a fulfilling, low-stress work life and ready access to health care should be universal entitlements.

<http://variety.com/2015/film/reviews/toronto-film-review-michael-moores-where-to-invade-next-1201590554/>

"We are human beings rather than human doings." Well-said. So, as human BEINGS, being our best selves is our calling – and being our best selves means comparing ourselves to our own value system – which may not be the norm. Sure, we can

compare our value systems against those of others. Yes, listening and learning from others is essential. But deciding our **worth** in comparison to others – not helpful.

For instance, I am not Alan Hunter. I'm not even Paul Tellstrom. But I'm a little more put together as Anne Cohen than I was in high school. And most days I do the best I can to reduce the suffering of others and love the unlovable and vote in every election possible. That's a good thing – for me and for Mt. Hollywood UCC – and for the United States of America.

Every one of you is a good person – as far as I can tell.
I don't want to BE you – but I sure do love being AROUND you.
Thank you for all you do to be your best selves and,
by being so,
making the world a better place –
for better or for worse.

Scripture Reading for Sunday February 28, 2016 – Lent 3 – Year C

Luke 13:1-9

1 At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

6 Then he 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.'"