

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
Richard E. Sindall, Guest Minister
The Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 11, 2014
Lessons: Isaiah 49:13-16, II Corinthians 5:17-21, and Luke 13:1-9

EVEN IF

Jesus knows how it is with gardeners. They care about plants, almost personally. The vineyard owner in Jesus' parable cares about fruit, produce, what these days we call "value added." To him, a fig tree that goes three years without producing edible figs has no right to go on living; it is wasting the soil by taking up space and consuming nutrients without adding any value. This is the way we now evaluate workers and even children in our society. If it's not producing, cut it down! But the gardener begs to differ because gardeners care about plants and so insist upon caring for them. Let the struggling tree stay another year, loosen the soil around it, and put manure on it. To him, a fig tree matters and is worth the extra time and effort to nurse it along. I live with a gardener, and so this parable makes perfect sense to me. Yes, that's how they are about plants.

The same holds true for teachers. A real teacher sees the particular child who may need a little extra help to get over the hump in the educational road and then go forward; to a teacher, no child is just a data point, a test score, a little failure already in kindergarten or first grade. To a real teacher, there is no such thing as "college material," because children are not stuff to be measured for value, then used or discarded. "Useless child" is an impossible word combination.

If we see how it is with gardeners who care about plants and teachers who care about children, why do we not understand how it is with God who cares far more deeply and personally for the lost, the struggling, the floundering person than any mere human being could possibly care? Jesus' teaching method here is one he employs frequently. I don't know what he called it, but today we call it "the argument from lesser to greater." If you would expect a good shepherd to go out into the night just to find one sheep that has wandered off, why do object when a teacher who knows God (meaning Jesus himself) extends God's compassion to the lost and degraded people you dismiss as sinners? Is not a lost person worth more to God than a lost sheep to a shepherd? Why, Jesus is asking his critics then or now, are you so ready to write people off and forget them, to judge them by the false standard of what you think they deserve, holding them to your rules and measures?

The prophet asks the discouraged and skeptical Jews exiled in Babylon, those who believe their covenant God has written them off and forgotten them, "Can a woman forget

her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb?” This is Mothers’ Day, and here the mother’s love for her child exemplifies the human compassion we would most expect to find and might be appalled to find lacking, but even so it serves as the “lesser” love in comparison with the even greater compassion of God. Even if. Even if a mother can forget her child and feel no sympathy for the son or daughter she bore, God cannot forget and will not fail to be moved by love.

Jesus is challenging the way we think of God. We human beings seem to want God to be the great judge who measures us by some divine standards, very similar to our own human standards, and then gives us what we deserve: reward or punishment, acceptance or rejection. Jesus says, No! God is not that way, and we do not get to assign God the proper divine responsibilities. God will be the way God is, whether we like it or not. All around Jesus, people are speaking and acting toward themselves and each other in terms of deserving or undeserving, of reward or punishment, of religious and moral pride or else guilt and shame. Jesus says, No! Cut it out! God is not that way.

Do you think, Jesus asks them, the Galileans Pilate had killed were greater sinners than any other Galileans? Do you imagine God pushed that tower over onto those men to kill them and so repay them for some special level of sinfulness? Jesus says, No! God is not in business of reward and punishment. Does that mean God couldn’t care less how we behave in life, how we treat each other, and how we treat ourselves? Of course not. A mother loves her child even when the child misbehaves or, later in life, messes up royally, but because she loves, the mother still cares very deeply about her son or daughter’s way of life – about what we call the “soul,” meaning the deepest and truest level of the self. For this reason of deep caring, those who love make themselves vulnerable to suffering. What happens to their children hurts them far more than what happens to the parents themselves. *Hurt me; don’t hurt my child.* But even if parents are not that way because they’ve reached their limits or their love is not strong enough, God is that way. God cares about you and me and the whole human community far more deeply than we care about each other or even ourselves.

Now, here come the frightening, troubling words. After assuring us that the people who were killed, by the malice of the Roman governor or the chance collapse of a tower, were not singled out as deserving what they got, Jesus issues a warning: “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.” If disaster does not fall upon those who deserve it, neither does it shy away from people who do not deserve it. There is no rule in this world that we get what we deserve or deserve what we get. No such rule. Jesus wants us to drop our deserving and drop our undeserving, too, and turn in trust and hope to the God who loves us. That’s what repent means: turn or return. True, John the Baptist (like many modern preachers) emphasizes *turning away from* our evildoing, our unjust and hurtful actions, our pretenses to religion, our selfishness and egotism – all the negatives that drag us

down. Jesus, however, emphasizes our *turning toward* the redemptive love of God. Logically, are they not the same in effect? If I do an about face, does it really matter whether I am turning away from one direction or turning toward the opposite direction? Well, if I'm marching, then, no, it does not matter; but if I'm repenting, then, yes, it does. True, if the hurt I have caused now grieves me, that's a good thing, but it's not enough. I cannot just turn away from the old and hurtful person I have been. I need also to be turning toward something new and healing, something positive and hopeful for life. Jesus tells us in every way he can and finally shows us in the painful and humiliating way he dies, that the positive, healing, hopeful thing to which he calls us to turn is the irrepressible, redemptive, reconciling love of God that refuses to give up on us.

What is success in life? What must I do to become a successful person? Jesus tells us: make a lot of money, maximize your profits no matter how many jobs you destroy and lives you ruin, find new markets and get the jump on them, secure your own home and family (never mind any others, just wall them out of your sight), and get as many people as possible to do your bidding. Right? No, not even close to right. Jesus had a way of seeing what we now call "value added" as, in truth, life degraded. What is success? Jesus sums it up in two commands which call us to life, healing, hope, and salvation: *Love the Lord your God with all you are and every ability you have, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.* Love myself? Yes, accept yourself as a person loved deeply and permanently by God. Care for yourself, thrive as a person, learn and grow, strive and achieve, but by giving rather than taking and by serving rather than out-competing. Love yourself and love your neighbor, whatever neighbor near or far God stands before you, as well as you love yourself.

Loving ourselves is no simple matter. Too easily we believe the judgments made upon us, both positive and negative. Tell children they are stupid, and they will regard themselves as stupid. I have known young adults who were just discovering they were, in reality, intelligent. Make people feel worthless, and they will see little value in themselves. Jesus noted how terribly hard it was for a rich person not to feel superior. When people are constantly treated as superior, they come to take their superiority for granted, even if they try to be humble about it. Just trying to be humble is an act of superiority; most people don't have to try because they are reminded by life's daily humiliations. But God does not see us that way. I think a major part of what we call salvation is learning to see ourselves more the way God sees us. We have accepted the judgments of others, even when we have resented them, and we have accepted the judgments we have passed upon ourselves and the labels we have pasted onto ourselves as though they truly identified who we are, but they do not. Who we are and who we are called by Jesus Christ to be are the truths about us determined by God's redemptive love. You are who God's love for you says you are. That is the truth no human judgment can erase, not even our own. Amen.