

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Easter, May 15, 2011
Lessons: Jeremiah 8:13-22 and Luke 13:1-9

HOPE FOR REDEMPTION

The older we become, the more easily I think we grow cynical about our prospects for changing the direction of our lives. Our habits are so fixed by repetition, our responses so practiced, and our sense of wonder so jaded by experiences less-than-half-understood that change may seem impossible. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” his rather depressing poem in which I, rebelling against the gloom, insist upon hearing a call to positive action, T. S. Eliot has his anti-hero muse:

For I have know them all already, known them all:—
Have known the evenings mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons. . . .

Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?
And how should I presume?

What an awful image for one’s own past! – as though his life were an un-emptied ash tray filled with stale cigarette butts.

“You cannot,” we say, “teach an old dog new tricks,” and these days, psychology and learning theory make it quite clear that we become in many significant ways “old dogs” long before reaching maturity. A huge percentage of all we ever know – considering not reading, writing, and arithmetic (let alone algebra) but our knowledge of time, space, self and others, and the world – we learn by the age of five or sooner, well before we enter school. We learn our prejudices against groups of other people before we learn to spell. Ironically, we are taught to discriminate against people by color before we even learn our colors. As very young children, we ingrain within our own minds whole sets of responses to such basic affects as fear, anger, interest, excitement, distress, and joy. No wonder we find change so threatening and difficult that we often throw in the towel before the fight even starts, telling ourselves and others that it’s just too late for us to change course now.

But it is not too late. That insistence upon hope wherever and whenever God meets us in life is the message of Jesus’ parable of the fig tree and the stubborn gardener. Please

do not follow the habit of some in the early church of allegorizing Jesus' parables when they were not and are not allegories. The owner of the property is not God, and the persistent gardener is not Jesus – as though God the Father were merciless with Jesus standing alone as our advocate trying to change God's mind. The parable uses the argument from lesser to greater, which works this way. It is understandable that a landowner may grow impatient with a fig tree that takes up usable space but produces no figs. What's its purpose? But it is also reasonable that a gardener who loves plants and understands them will undertake to give the failed plant another chance to produce fruit with a little tender loving care and some manure.

Now, here's the lesser-to-greater argument. If we understand that a real gardener would volunteer to go the extra mile for a barren fig tree – if that makes sense to us because of gardeners we know – then how can it make no sense to us that God, who loves more profoundly than we can even imagine, would go many extra miles to redeem a person, a human being created to live as God's image and likeness in this world? Jesus' resurrection vindicates his belief and teaching that God is far, far more interested in redeeming our lives than in judging us for our failures and sins.

Even in our reading from Jeremiah, which pronounces the judgment of God and the terrible consequences Jerusalem persists in bringing down upon itself, the grief and lament of the prophet over the doom of his people echo God's own grief. Listen. "My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick. . . . For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me." Who is speaking? Jeremiah is, of course, but only he? Does the human who cares stand alone in agony over the destruction of his people? The prophet is not called just to mouth words poured into his head by the Spirit of God to be spoken without understanding or emotion. The prophet was made to feel something of God's own terrible compassion for the people who will not respond, something of God's anger and disappointment, and of God's irrational love. Out from that empathy with God issues the lament of Jeremiah who has been drawn against his will into sympathetic vibration with the heart strings of his God. Is it any wonder that there will yet be redemption for the tragically stubborn people? God cannot bear to let them go to the destiny of the own choosing.

We need to understand the heart of God. Otherwise, we reduce our faith to a string of truisms to be learned and repeated correctly but miss the truth itself which is redemptive love willing to suffer for the sake of those who do not respond but pursue their own course toward destruction as though they had no other choice or desire. Yes, it is hard to change and be changed, especially in deeply significant ways that would transform our lives and make us so different from the way we have been that it would be profoundly correct to call us new people. The Pentecostal and evangelical idea of being "born again" is not all wrong but has been made too shallow by being reduced to emotional experiences and even spiritual seizures

that become addictive as they are repeated but fail to change the mind and heart so Christian faith produces justice and compassion in the world. The tree puts out leaves in season and out but bears no fruit. In the Gospel of John, being “born anew” or “born from above” means becoming newly responsive to God’s redemptive love so that the very self is transformed, and it’s a process of coming to life, not a single event that settles a transaction for entry into heaven. The process of being forgiven is not complete until we become forgiving. The process of learning from Jesus – of being his disciples, his students – comes to fruition as we begin naturally (according to our new nature) to put his teachings into practice for the sake of the community of faith and the world of people.

Thursday evening in our Visioning Team meeting, one team member called our attention to the meaning of the word “church.” Church is not a place we come on Sunday morning (“I went to church yesterday”) or an event of worship. It certainly is not a building or even an institution. A church is a gathering of people, an assembly brought together by various levels and intensities of response to the call of Jesus to be God’s people. I can no more be Christian by myself than I can be a son, a brother, a husband, or a father alone without my family.

When I use the biblical word *redemption*, as I am using it in this sermon, I harken back to its meaning of restoration to the family or clan of something (property) or someone (a person) that has been taken, lost, or given up. In the ancient world, a man could sell himself into slavery for security or to pay a debt, or the person could be sold by the family (as Joseph was by his brothers) or could be taken by force as happened as a consequence of warfare. The redeemer paid the price for the slave’s freedom. So far what I’m saying may sound familiar to people accustomed to the Christian message, but I find redemption extended to include life and time that have been lost, squandered, given up, or taken away whether by misfortune, bad choices, the malice or unconcern of others, the cruelty of systems that use up people’s lives before casting them off, or any other of the countless ways in which hope gets crushed, promise cut short, and hands that labored left empty. It’s not only about sins and guilt or failures and shame; it’s also about circumstances beyond our control. Lives that have not born fruit or whose fruit has been small and disappointing.

It is not too late for redemption. God’s compassion – God’s suffering with and for us – can redeem the past, not by giving the lost time back to us to relive, but by turning its effects upon us from disappointment to hope, from time wasted to learning that can empower us to live and serve, from shame to profoundly new dignity, freedom, and self-respect that can reach out beyond itself to serve God’s redemptive love in this world. That’s the promise that won’t go away because Jesus Christ has lived out God’s refusal to let it go. With him, we have resurrection hope even for the redemption of our past so that, being turned from disappointment and what seemed to be our fate, we can live anew and be new in life. Amen.