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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
3/3/2013, The Third Sunday in Lent
1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9
Getting Personal

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me begin with the words of Jesus against delay. Our Lord would have us turn to repentance and amendment of life immediately. He does not want us to put this off. My opening text, then, is from our Gospel Lesson, from Luke 13:

²And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? ³I tell you, No; but unless *you* repent you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:2-3, RSV)

Here the disciples were, having an ordinary discussion about the awful news of the day. The Roman Governor, Pilate, had order the death of some Galileans visiting Jerusalem. A gruesome image is used to describe things:

¹There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Maybe those who reported this news to Jesus expected that he would either condemn Pilate or express sorrow for the Galileans who had died. But Jesus does neither one. Perhaps he *is* angry with Pilate for this deed, and surely he does sympathize with the Galileans who had died and with their families back home. But that is not what Jesus talks about. That is not the first thing on his heart. The first thing is neither Pilate nor the Galileans, but the people standing right there before him. He takes the whole discussion, which had been in the calm, orderly, objective grammatical third person, and he makes it personal. He switches to that very personal pronoun “you”:

³I tell you, No; but unless *you* repent you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:3, RSV)

It is as if Jesus takes hold of the camera and redirects it away from distant people and events and focuses it right on the people standing before him. His concern is with *them*, not with Pilate and other folks off in Jerusalem.

It is the same focus Jesus has when he meets us a few minutes from now at the Communion Table. There are ten million things Jesus could be thinking about on a quiet Sunday morning, but in fact, when he looks upon you this morning and says “This is my body, my blood, for you,” you should well believe that you have his full attention. He is speaking to you and thinking of you with his whole heart and his whole mind.

PASSING WITHIN EARSHOT

It is one thing to pass within earshot of people who love you—say, your parents—and notice them lost in an earnest conversation. It is something quite different to overhear that they happen to be talking about *you*! You see them, but they are so immersed in the conversation that they do not see you. The look on their faces shifts as they speak. Sometimes they are smiling, recalling good times, and in any case, you know that they love you and smile upon you always with affection. But at certain points in this conversation, you notice a shadow come upon your parents. There are worry lines on their faces, and perhaps you notice that they are looking older and a bit worn out. They have loved you, prayed for you, tried to give you a good example in life. They are very proud of you, and yet in this conversation, they are worried for you. Perhaps they worry because they know that you are worrying. Illness or unemployment or a broken heart or some deep disappointment has touched your life. They know about your troubles and they are discussing them. Or perhaps they fear that you are heading off along some wrong path. Because they love you, they are discussing this, trying as best they can to figure out how they can help. They are talking in this manner, unaware that you overhear. If you had been some distance away and could not overhear, you might notice them in conversation and be mildly interested. But when it dawns on you that they are discussing *you*, then things become more interesting. This is no abstract, distant discussion. Rather, it is a discussion that concerns you.

That’s how it seems to be in this morning’s Gospel Lesson. People are discussing distant events and distant people. But suddenly it dawns on them that Jesus is not talking about those distant events or people. Rather, he is talking about them. Indeed he is talking *to* them. Things are no longer calm and safe. Jesus had made this conversation a very personal one.

Well, he must! His love for his people is such that he cannot content himself with abstractions, and he cannot permit his people to indulge in intellectualization and the various techniques of defensiveness that are so natural for us. We might want to shift the conversation to the third person and to talk about distant matters, but Jesus always says to you and to me what he said to Peter along the shore of the sea:

What is that to thee, Peter? Follow thou me. (rf. John 21:22)

ST. PAUL

We find the same pattern of personalizing things in this morning's Epistle Reading. Indeed, the great context for this particular reading is a verse in which St. Paul switches from the calm grammatical third person to the much more personal first person. He has been zooming along in 1 Corinthians 9 defending his apostolic ministry to the Corinthians. He urges them to take seriously the path of piety. He uses athletic imagery:

²⁴Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. ²⁵Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. (1 Corinthians 9:24-25, RSV)

And then this great preacher preaches to himself. He turns the camera lens on himself and yields to the personal call of the Lord. And so it is that he ends Chapter 9 with this great saying:

²⁶Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; ²⁷but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others *I myself* should be disqualified. (1 Corinthians 9:26-27, RSV)

Paul doesn't want to be left out. He has preached to others. Now he preaches unto himself, because the Gospel is not first of all a message about *others*. It is first of all a message about you and me.

This, then, becomes Paul's theme in our Chapter, Chapter 10. It is as if he is grabbing the Corinthians by the shirt collar, and grabbing us too along the way, and appealing to us to apply the Gospel to *ourselves*.

He does this in Chapter 10 by relying upon what the scholars call "typology." This is a way of reading the Bible that makes the Bible very personal. The Bible is no longer a story about other people distant in time and space. Rather, those distant people are important because they are the *types* for you and me. There is a similarity between them and us, and this similarity is not just dumb luck, but is the very intention of the Holy Spirit. So, when we read about people in the Old Testament, or when we read about the Corinthians in the New Testament, we must not rest content with thinking that these are

stories about other people, but rather they are stories about you and me too. The similarity between what happens to them and what happens to us is organic and essential. It is one long story of God and his dealings with his people—some of whom lived long ago and some of whom live now: us! You and me!

Paul puts his principle this way:

¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down *to instruct us*, on whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Corinthians 10:11, NRSV)

It is striking that in his examples, St. Paul uses sacramental language. It is as if he is warning us that it is not enough to be baptized or even to receive the Blessed Sacrament if we do not permit or seek a real change in a more Christ-like direction. Listen to his discussion of what I call the sacramental life of the ancient Israelites:

¹I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud [that glorious pillar of cloud that led them by day and the pillar of fire that led them by night, Exodus 13:21], and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness. ⁶Now these things occurred *as examples for us*, so that we might not desire evil as they did. (1 Corinthians 10:1-6, NRSV)

St. Paul uses typology even for such mundane matters as grumbling. Do not be a grumbler, Paul says, because look what happened to our brothers and sisters in the past when they grumbled:

¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹These things happened *to them* to serve as an example, and they were written down *to instruct us...* (1 Corinthians 10:10-11, NRSV)

Likewise, in our Gospel Lesson, Jesus looks away from the news of the political tragedy—the slaying of the Galileans—and away from the natural tragedy—the construction accident in which eighteen people were killed. Jesus

looks away from those events in order to look into our eyes. “And what *of you*, my dear one? I urge you to repent why there is still time left for repenting.” And he illustrates his appeal with the parable of the unfruitful fig tree. Things are urgent. Maybe the Lord will delay another year. If he does, that is grace. But it does not appear that the Lord will delay forever:

⁸And he answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. ⁹And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ (Luke 13:9, RSV)

I do not want to be cut down. I do not want you to be cut down.

FORGETTING THE PAST

In my Pastor’s Study, I have a saying from Chrysostom hanging on a bookcase shelf, right across from my desk. The saying goes this way:

For God will say also to us, “I gave you time to learn this art of piety, wherefore have ye foolishly and uselessly wasted that time?” St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on St. John*, NPNF, Vol. 14, page 211

I am proud of this saying and value it as a reminder that time is precious and I should be using it to serve the Lord.

But my wife, Carol, is uneasy with the saying for a good reason—a good pastoral reason. She worries that the saying places too much emphasis on how we have lived our past and on how we have failed to use that past well. She fears that there is too little hope in that saying.

And, of course, she is right about that. In today’s Gospel story, for example, Jesus does not waste one word condemning his disciples for their past and for their failure to “learn this art of piety” during the years they had been granted. Instead, the emphasis of Jesus is on the present, this moment, and on how we are to go forward in life. Carol’s heart is more in the direction of St. Paul’s great line:

...forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, ¹⁴I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13-14, KJV)

What Jesus wants is that, however old we are, and however many years we might have wasted so far, *now* is the time given to us to repent and to draw nearer to him. If ever there were a good application of the old saying, it applies to our spiritual life: “Do not put off until tomorrow what you can do today.”

OTHERS WAIT FOR US TOO

I close with this thought. It is not simply that Jesus is waiting for us to repent and urging us to do so quickly. So are other people in our lives. If you are a parent, for example, it is always the case that when you take a look at your little ones, you see right before your eyes a good reason to repent. I do not care whether you have the holiness of Mother Teresa. When you look at your children, you are seeing a good reason for repenting and doing even better in life.

And if you are married, when you see that one who claimed your heart, you are seeing good reason to repent and mend your ways. Maybe the world thinks you are fine just the way you are. Maybe even your beloved thinks you fine. And yet if we would draw closer to Jesus, in the process we will also draw closer to your loved ones and love them even more. Do not put such a good change off till another day.

And if you are a prostitute or a pimp or a drug dealer or an illegal arms seller or an armed robber, then put off your illegal ways. Make a beginning. Do better tomorrow than you did yesterday. Start on the comeback trail. Jesus said repent quickly, delaying no more. He did not say “Become a St. Francis right off the bat.” Repentance is not the same thing as perfection. Repentance has to do with the direction of your life. Let it be toward Jesus. With increasing earnestness, let our lives move toward Him, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.