

Lent 3C 2010

Texts: Exodus 3:1-15

Psalm 63: 1-8

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

“Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. “ Luke 13: 2-3

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Roger didn't know when he got up that morning that it was to be his last few hours of life. Roger didn't know that before the day ended, his life would end in the parking lot of a coffee shop in South St. Louis.¹

By all accounts it started as a typical day: showering, dressing for work, getting his caffeine fix on the way into work. His life ended in anything but a typical fashion. In attempting to stop two petty thieves from stealing a tip jar he was run over and killed, all for a measly five dollars. What must he have done to deserve that?

That sounds like a funny question, doesn't it? It is even kind of insulting, embarrassing; it makes me bristle to even ask it.

But in Jesus' time it was a very normal question to ask. It would have been far more unusual not to ask what a person could have done to deserve God's wrath and punishment. That was the mindset of the time. If bad things happened it was obviously a case of having sinned against God and getting one's comeuppance. If good things happened it was obviously a case of being favored, of being in right relationship and of deserving whatever blessings came one's way.

In today's Gospel reading, this very question is asked. Pilate, a person not known for his compassion and understanding, went into the Temple in Jerusalem and slaughtered those present while they were offering their sacrifices to God. The Temple was defiled not only by the presence of Pilate's troops, but also by the carnage that was to follow.

¹ St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 6, 2010

The worshippers were making their sacrificial offerings when the troops entered and sacrificed the worshippers letting their blood mingle in with the blood of the animals given to God in worship.

The worshipper's day started like any other. Getting up, going to the Temple to worship and by the end of the day they lay dead, killed by Pilate's soldiers, for what reason we do not know. What must they have done to deserve such a grisly end?

"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they are worse sinners than all other Galileans?" Jesus asked. Yes, that is exactly what those present thought. That was the only thing that made sense in their worldview.

But Jesus has a different message. "No," he says, "they aren't any better or any worse than any others." And just as the crowd begins to relax, begins to think, "Oh, thank God!" Jesus pulls the rug out from under them, "but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did."

Whether it was first century Palestine or twenty-first century America it has always been easier to look at someone else's sin rather than our own. But Jesus is having nothing of it. Life happens, stuff happens to the deserving and the undeserving. That is just a fact we have to come to grips with.

We put ourselves on perilous ground when we occupy our time and efforts by concentrating on someone else's sin as a way of not dealing with our own. When we start believing that our sins are in some way less than others, when we start to believe that we are in good with God and others aren't, "Watch out!" Paul tells us in the epistle. "When you are standing watch out that you do not fall." When we believe we are more deserving of God's grace and blessings is when we are in the greatest danger of tumbling out of control.

To put ourselves above others, to think more of ourselves than we ought, is to deny the gift of grace and forgiveness to others. Such spiritual pride is a death sentence, Jesus tells us. God knows each and every one of us has enough sin in our lives to keep us repenting for a

lifetime. We couldn't possibly finish repenting of our own sin before we could start judging another's. Life is just too short. And that is the message this morning. Life is too short for us to put off approaching God every day in humility and asking for forgiveness.

There is a moment when our time is over, when we will not have the opportunity to repent and that moment can come very unexpectedly. In the blink of an eye, life can change and take a direction no one wanted or could have foreseen.

Aaron didn't know that morning that before the day ended he would have taken the life of another human being, an innocent human being. Aaron didn't know that a decision he made in a split second would change his life, the life of Roger and the lives of all who loved both of these men.

Aaron walked into the coffee shop and he and a young woman decided to run off with the tip jar. When Roger decided to try and stop them he was run over by Aaron. Aaron was arrested for the crime and he pleaded guilty to a charge of manslaughter. He spent nine months in jail.

It would be very easy to put ourselves above Aaron. It would be simple to just say, "Well, I would never steal anything. I would never put myself in such a position or do anything so stupid." It would be easy to do this, and it would also be wrong.

If we were to play this game, there is another question we would have to ask ourselves, because the story doesn't stop here, it doesn't stop with Aaron's prison sentence and punishment.

If we were to put ourselves above Aaron and his sinful acts that day, we would also have to compare ourselves to Roger's family, a family that offered grace and forgiveness to Aaron even in the tremendous loss they suffered, even in the senseless loss that changed their lives.

How many of us could extend that hand of love to someone who killed our loved one? It is a rare enough occurrence that when grace and forgiveness are given it makes the newspapers and T. V. stations.

A few years back there was a terrible shooting at an Amish school. The little girls were lined up against the blackboard of their classroom and shot one by one. What did they do to deserve such an end? Nothing.

Before that day ended, the elders of the Amish community went to the home of the shooter and expressed their forgiveness to his family and insisted that the money raised for the community and the care of the children be shared with the family of the perpetrator.

A few weeks after this happened a psychologist was on the radio stating that by offering forgiveness so freely the Amish were short circuiting their healing process and weren't getting in touch with the deep emotional wounds that the shooting caused. I completely disagree. It was because they had a culture of forgiveness and because forgiveness was a defining value of their community that the community could offer grace and move on.

Roger's family did the same thing. They, too, are a community of forgiveness. They asked Aaron to come back to the scene of Roger's death and be a part of a memorial service. As Aaron and his father got out of their vehicle Roger's family came to them and hugged them and told Aaron how glad they were that he was there. One by one the family and friends of Roger came to this young man and hugged him and told him he was forgiven.

Aaron didn't know that morning how that day would end. Aaron came ready to be hated and scorned. Instead he was loved back into community and all of those involved found that forgiveness heals. It healed Aaron and it healed Roger's family. Roger's brothers, Chris and Gary, said, "It is about reconciliation...we are trying to do the right thing, to move on and carry on."²

Aaron stunned by what he was being given by this family, said, "the family is too gracious. I'd never ask it from anybody. I'd never expect it from anybody."³

² St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 6, 2010 p. A5

³ ibid A5

Roger's family, in the time given to them here on earth, decided to live a life of forgiveness and as a result, Aaron was given his life back. His actions on that day, which had the potential for being the defining moment of his young life, were redeemed and what defined a horrible event was not anger and hatred but love and forgiveness. This is a story not of death, but of resurrection. It is a story of the redeeming power of love.

That is what repentance is about. To hold back forgiveness is to lock ourselves into a death of our own making. To refuse to live into the core value of our faith, which is forgiveness, is to die as surely as if we were to be cut down by Pilate's soldiers.

Jesus' words of "repent or perish" is not a one sided coin. The flip side of "repent or perish" is "forgive and live." It is not easy. Forgiveness may well be the most difficult thing God will ever ask of us, but it also is the most necessary. And it is only through the freely given grace of God that we find the strength and courage to do so.

Amen.