

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco CA Z14
3 Lent (Year C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 24 March 2019

Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63: 1-8
1 Cor. 10:1-13
Luke 13:1-9

What Cannot Love You Back

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt" (Ex. 3)?

Never give your whole self to someone or something that cannot love you back. A couple of weeks ago standing in line for the ODC/Volti Path of Miracles performance I struck up a conversation with a group of visitors to the Cathedral. We talked for quite a while and afterwards the older woman said with a knowing smile, "I bet you're the youth minister here!"

I could not have been more pleased. I love talking to young people. More than adults they seem ready to veer out of the realm of the superficial into the profound. When you say, "never give your whole self to someone or something that cannot love you back," they know that we're talking about much more than just boyfriends and girlfriends. This has to do with money, reputation, identity, work, popularity, security, even how we read the news.¹ Do you belong to God or to the New York Times, to Jesus or the Democratic Party, to the Holy Spirit or your boss at work?

So much is asked of us. We live with the constant temptation to treat the wrong things as our gods, to act as if the purpose of our life is to merely pamper our own ego. Isn't that what most people mean when they say that all they want is to be happy?

The theologian James Allison writes that although it may seem counterintuitive Lent is primarily about abundance.² Most people associate it with renunciation. People ask, "what are you giving up?" But the purpose of a Lenten discipline is to more fully receive God's gift of life, to abide in God's joy through gratitude.

We have a difficult time imagining how something can come from nothing but that is what God does. Scarcity has no meaning to God. And yet for us it is everything. This unquestioned assumption that there is not enough money, not enough respect, not enough love – threatens to kill us, or worse to dull us so that we are never really alive.

We could do something about this but somehow we don't get around to it. In the twelfth and thirteenth chapters of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus talks at length about this problem. Giving our whole self to God, living joyfully with a constant sense of God's abundance comes through what he calls metanoia. This Greek word means to change

our mind, our soul, who we have come to be. We translate it as repentance, but it is not so much about correcting one mistake as it is about a whole new way of living.

To a crowd of thousands Jesus strains to express the terrible urgency of repentance. Because it is personal and about us, because we do not want to change – we find it very hard to hear. So in order to wake us up Jesus uses a rhetorical strategy of flooding us with a score of different images and metaphors. He seems to be saying, "it's like this, or this, or if that won't work for you try this."³

He says repentance is urgent because nothing will remain secret. What we thought would remain unspoken will be shouted from the rooftops (Lk. 12). He says do not be afraid of people who kill the body but of losing your spiritual life. God knows even the number of hairs on our heads. Do not worry about the scarcity of food and drink because God cares for the ravens, the grass, and the lilies of the field.

Then Jesus tries this. He tells the story of a self-satisfied rich man who contemplates building a new barn. This man says to himself, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry." He seems to have it made but he dies that night in spiritual poverty.

Or think of it like this: we are servants of God who need to keep awake with our lamps lit so that we will be ready when our master comes at an unexpected time, like a thief in the night. Or, like this: we are walking to court with our accuser to meet a judge who could imprison us for the rest of our lives. Wouldn't it make sense to work out an arrangement between us rather than to take this risk?

The Galileans killed in the temple and the Tower of Siloam that fell killing eighteen people are near the culmination of this flood of images about the urgency of repentance. Those people did not die because they were sinners but something far worse will happen if we do not change our ways.

Finally Jesus says it. The truth. Our life is a fig tree. The owner wants to pluck it out because it has borne no fruit, but the gardener wants to give it just one more year to see what we might achieve. We do not have forever to start living fruitfully.

The point of these provocative, staccato images is not to get stuck in philosophical questions like who is the owner or judge, or what do the barn and lilies of the field stand for. The point is to follow the path that Jesus describes in all these stories, to urgently repent with our whole lives.

We need to live with integrity so that we are unafraid of what would happen when our secrets are shouted from the rooftops. We must become more concerned with justice and righteousness rather than just endlessly and selfishly accumulating wealth. We need to be always ready with our lamps burning to do God's good work. We should be so alert for opportunities to be reconciled that we are acting as if our freedom and very life depends on it.

These stories come from this world. They are not about God magically striking people down through the hand of a tyrant or in an accident. Last week I spoke at length about never using someone else's suffering to craft a story to make ourselves feel better. God does not afflict other people with pain in order to get our attention.

When we meet someone who is urgently repenting we see it. Today's Forum guest Earl Smith grew up on the rough side of the tracks in Stockton, California.⁴ At times his mother treated him cruelly. Perhaps because of this, or to get attention, or because there weren't many opportunities for a young African American man, he began to get into trouble.

First, he stole little things. Then he sold drugs. By the time he was nineteen he lived a double life as a normal college student and as the leader of a network of gang members. He was intimidating and harming innocent people.

At the age of nineteen one of his drug dealers who owed him money came to the door with another young man. The gun Smith usually kept with him was still in his golf bag in the closet but he let the two of them in. For the sake of a few hundred dollars his guests shot him six times. He writes about what it feels like to be shot. It's like having hot pokers driven into your body.

As Smith hovered near death in the hospital he heard the voice of God. It said, "You are not going to die... You're going to be the chaplain at San Quentin Prison." It does not seem to me that a calling could get any clearer than that and yet the remarkable thing is that for a while he did nothing about it. Perhaps he felt like he had all the time in the world.

But God was pursuing him and he could not resist for long. Eventually he became a chaplain at San Quentin. During his first Christmas there he was delivering Christmas cards for inmates to send home.

The prison was entirely segregated by race and gang affiliation. When he got to cell 66 the inmate was leaning against the door gripping the bars. Smith's stomach dropped

and he broke out in a cold sweat. He said to the inmate, "What's your name?" Then suddenly the man recognized him and jumped away from the bars. It was the man who had shot him six times.

Although eight years had passed and Smith knew that in order to be healed he had to forgive him, Smith had not been able to do it. He slid the stack of Christmas cards between the bars of the one who had come so close to ending his life. As he walked down the cellblock he wept.

Smith continued his task and after forty more cells he turned around and went back. Part of him wanted to just terrorize the man but when he got there he knew exactly what to say. In a low voice that no one else could hear he said, "Hey, I want to thank you for shooting me. God used you to get to me." Although these were the hardest words he had ever spoken he felt released, freed from hating this other man.⁵

We sometimes forget that Moses was a murderer and a humiliated fugitive. He only survived by tending sheep for his father-in-law in a distant land. When God appeared to him in the burning bush, he could not believe what he was being asked to do. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh" (Ex. 3)? We call this a theophany, a moment when God appears to us.

It is true that what cannot love us back has a strange kind of hold on us. But we can be free. God did not just speak to Earl Smith or Moses. God is talking to us too. Jesus uses dozens of images about rich men, rooftops, servants, barns, judges, lilies, towers and fig trees. He is trying to convince us that right now is the time to change our lives, to repent.

Who will we belong to? What fruit will our lives bear? May this Lent confirm our faith in the abundance of God, the one who creates everything out of nothing and brings us home through his son Jesus.

¹ "[N]ever give the best of yourself to someone or something that cannot love you back." Emily C. Heath, "Living by the Word - Third Sunday in Lent: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9," *The Christian Century*, 9 February 2016. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-01/february-28-third-sunday-lent>

² James Alison, "Living by the Word - Sunday, Marcy 3, 2013: Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9," *The Christian Century*, 19 February 2013. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-01/sunday-march-3-2013>

³ Matt and Liz Boulton, "Life and Death: SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Lent 3," *SALT*, 20 March 2019. <http://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/3/20/life-and-death-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-lent-3>

⁴ Earl Smith with Mark Schlabach, *Death Row Chaplain: Unbelievable Stories from America's Most Notorious Prison* (NY: Howard Books, 2015).

⁵ Ibid., 63-7.