

Extra TLC
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"Extra TLC" Pilgrim Church UCC, Third Sunday in Lent, (Luke 13:1-9) February 28, 2016

Writer Anne Lamott once shared a friend from Texas' message that was left on her answering machine during a difficult period in her life. This friend called to remind her: "Don't forget, God loves us exactly the way we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay like this." [1] In our tradition we don't speak all that much about sin. We don't focus on the judgment of God. And that is perfectly fine by me . . . most of the time. But we human beings are flawed creatures, my friends. Sometimes God does love us too much to let us stay exactly as we are.

Lent is a season of repentance. We hear that word "repent" and shouldn't always associate it with street corner preachers yelling at people to repent or face the wrath of God. Repentance is for all of us. Repenting is thinking again about what one has said or done that caused harm. Repenting is changing one's intentions. Repenting is regretting something and turning back to God or one another to make amends. In short, we do all separate from God, from one another, and from our best selves. We all sin. Therefore repentance is for all of us. [2] Moreover, repentance isn't primarily about guilt in the UCC these days anyway, it's about freedom. The freedom we can feel when we've laid that burden of sin down, when we've gotten that shame off our shoulders. Returning to God is about freedom for new life. Lent has that repentance theme come up over and over again, and it's one reason this holy season is so important in preparing us for Easter.

Jesus' parable on this Third Sunday in Lent is quite simple. It's a parable about repentance and potential, about God loving us too much to let us stay exactly the way we are right now. There's a fig tree in a vineyard and for three years it doesn't bear any fruit. It's wasting space, precious resources, and seems to be completely unproductive. The vineyard owner tells the caretaker, "Cut it down; why should it use up the soil?" [3] It might be an economic loss—fig trees didn't come cheap. But at least this worthless fig tree would be out of sight and out of mind. The caretaker of the vineyard intervenes: "Leave it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down." [4] The caretaker asks for one more chance. Maybe if I give this tree extra TLC—it won't be barren anymore. Don't give up on us yet!

Biblical scholar Arland Hultgren points out that applying fertilizer to a fig tree would have been highly unusual in Jesus' day, "a sign of extraordinary care for the tree." [5] And that's exactly what the caretaker asks for. Let me go the extra mile to care for this tree and see if my attention and love will make a difference. The two figures in this parable (the owner and the caretaker) could represent two sides of God: judgment and mercy. It shows how God must sometimes wrestle with seemingly barren fig trees that aren't living into their potential. God must wrestle with cutting them down or loving them that much more so that they will bear fruit in the end. This may be what Jesus was teaching his followers when he told them this parable of the unproductive fig tree.

Jesus taught that mercy wins the day. God's grace is greater than anything we can imagine or deserve. Our God is a God of second chances who sees potential in us that we may not yet see in ourselves. Our God is a God who loves us too much to let us stay exactly as we are. A God who runs out to greet us when we finally decide it's time to come back home. Though let's be honest, isn't it frustrating when we see potential in someone and feel in our gut that they're not living into it? When we have high hopes for someone and it feels like they don't

even care? Is it easy to provide extra tender loving care when the cause feels a little hopeless and someone has gone years without making any sort of progress, without showing any sign of growth?

Thinking of how potential, repentance, and mercy plays out in our communities right now—many of us know that there's a heroin epidemic in our country. Heroin deaths have quintupled in the past 10 years. Families and friends in our own congregation have experienced tragedies. Attorney General Eric Holder was interviewed recently and asked if the public reaction has changed because it's now mostly white kids who are doing heroin. And he responded that there is an element of truth to that. Heroin used to be seen as an "inner city" drug though now heroin has taken on a whiter, richer face as it's become more pervasive in the suburbs.[6] Massachusetts has been dealing with a high number of opiate deaths, and Gloucester has made national news with how their police department is handling heroin addiction.

If you go to the Gloucester Police Department's website you'll find a specific section devoted to addicts and those who love them. Gloucester Police created a new program that get addicts immediate help. Here are their directions and it's worth quoting fully: "If an addict comes into the Gloucester Police Department and asks for help, an officer will take them to the Addison Gilbert Hospital, where they will be paired with a volunteer 'ANGEL' who will help guide them through the process. We have partnered with more than a dozen additional treatment centers to ensure that our patients receive the care and treatment they deserve—not in days or weeks, but immediately. If you have drugs or drug paraphernalia on you, we will dispose of it for you. You will not be arrested. You will not be charged with a crime. You will not be jailed. All you have to do is come to the police station and ask for help. We are here to do just that."[7]

This treatment program advocated by a police department in our Commonwealth is about seeing potential in people that they cannot see in themselves. This is about second chances and extra tender loving care for people who may be lost otherwise. When reading the program description, it's compelling that the volunteers who help addicts are called Angels. Aren't they? For those folks who have already or will walk into that police department seeking help, it's perhaps about repentance. Turning and returning to life, to hope, to love. Addiction isn't simple and it's not as if this is the end of their journey. But it's no wonder Gloucester's Police have become recognized nationally for this initiative. They are seeing potential in people that they cannot yet see in themselves. And they are showing mercy upon mercy upon mercy.

There are many people here, there, and everywhere who are hurting and need to know the reality of God's grace. That there's nothing they can do to earn God's grace, it's freely given because of who God is. And there's nowhere we can go that God is not. Jesus was trying to use that parable of the fig tree to remind his followers even now that God chooses mercy. Over and again, God chooses to give us new life. God wants us to bear fruit and live into who God created us to be.

You know, when my sister Maureen and I were in Glacier National Park a couple summers ago we went on some hikes, of course. We each chose two trails to hike during our stay, and one of Maureen's selected hikes was the Huckleberry Nature Trail AKA the Forest and Fire Nature Trail. The description in our Day Hikes Guide Map read as follows: "formerly an interpretative trail about fires until it got burned again, this trail is a mellow walk with limited offerings." Now doesn't that sound compelling? Maureen argued with me (as she's done since childhood, destined to be a lawyer) that the trail was located in part of the Park that we hadn't explored yet and wouldn't it be interesting to see how a forest recovers from fire?

So we woke up early to hike the Huckleberry Nature Trail AKA the Forest and Fire Nature Trail. And though it almost pains me to say so, my older sister was totally right. That trail wasn't just

interesting, it was moving. You hike through the rebirth of a brand new forest. There are thousands of pine saplings growing among thousands of dead trees. This area of Glacier National Park was severely burned in 1967 and again in 2001.[8] Though part of the rebirth process of a burned forest attracts wildflowers. So among the dead trees and young saplings are the most beautiful purple wildflowers everywhere you look. When you get to the top of the trail you see good views of the mountains near the Continental Divide by looking through dead trees. It's a view of life and death, of beauty and charred earth. There wasn't anyone around but the two of us and it was such a moving experience to walk with my sister in the midst of rebirth after devastation. To see a new forest coming to life after not one, but two forest fires had destroyed everything. It came to me viscerally that this is how God works in our lives. New saplings grow. Wildflowers burst onto the scene. We may think that there is no hope yet hope springs eternal. Our God is a God of second chances.

It seems to me that God's gut reaction is always mercy. God's light seeps into our lives through the cracks in our outer exterior where we too often pretend that we have everything together all the time. It seems to me that the wildflowers will start to bloom after the forest has been burned down—because rebirth is on the horizon no matter how dead the landscape seems. God is present in our lives to love us exactly the way we are, and love us too much to let us stay like this. To take that fig tree, dig around, and spread some manure to help it bear fruit. To see potential in us when we can't yet see it in ourselves and put angels in our lives to show forth compassion. To bring rebirth to a dead, burned, barren wasteland of a forest or even a life. May we live lives of deep hope. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, 135.

[2] James Rowe Adams, "Repent and Repentance," in *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors*, 243-244.

[3] Luke 13:7, NRSV.

[4] Luke 13:8, NRSV.

[5] Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, 244.

[6] Sonia Saraiya, "Eric Holder gets real about heroin and race: It's a crisis because white people are hooked," February 24, 2016, Salon, http://www.salon.com/2016/02/24/eric_holder_gets_real_about_heroin_and_r...

[7] "For Addicts and their Friends, Families, and Caregivers," Gloucester Police Department, <http://gloucesterpd.com/addicts/>

[8] "Forest and Fire Nature Trail," Glacier National Park, <http://www.hikinginglacier.com/forest-and-fire-nature-trail.htm>