

3.23.2022 Midweek Service (Lent 3)

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Danez Smith, "little prayer"; Luke 13:1-9

"God's Compassion Heals Us"

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The theme for tonight's meditation is about God's compassion for humanity. God is patient, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We know this, and yet we often have a difficult time returning to God.

In the gospel reading for this evening, people complained to Jesus about the suffering that many Galileans endured under Pilate. Jesus' reply to them remains relevant for us today, "*Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans?*" What Jesus is describing is something we also struggle with; we tend to view human suffering as God's judgment upon people. Jesus stopped them cold, saying, "*No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.*"

Jesus spoke these words twice in today's gospel, making it clear that we suffer, wither, perish and die because of sin. Human sinfulness is what causes us to mistreat one another, and human sinfulness causes humanity to be separated from community with God and one another. Indeed, the 20th century theologian, Paul Tillich rightly described sin as "separation" – separation from God and from one another.

Jesus' Parable of the Fig Tree is meant to illustrate our need to repent of sin and to bear the fruit of good works for God and for our neighbor. In this parable, we might interpret God as the owner of the vineyard and Jesus as the vine dresser. God comes to each of us saying that we have not produced the fruit of repentance, and Jesus intercedes on our behalf saying, "*Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*"

Jesus is the Mediator, the Savior whose word fertilizes the soil of our hearts. Jesus offers to help us, always tending to the roots of our lives so that we might grow. During Lent, we realize again that human sinfulness is the root of our problems. We will never be able to heal our world of its deeply rooted problems unless we first address our own sinfulness and admit that the human heart is deeply flawed by sin and turned in upon itself with self-centeredness.

The poem that I read a moment ago by contemporary American poet Danez Smith, describes the grace filled moment that happens when we are moved from ruin and slaughter, to healing. Danez Smith describes this movement from ruin and slaughter to healing, with the words, "let it be." Like the vine dresser in the gospel who says "let it alone" and I will tend to the roots and care for it – we are

encouraged to see that God wants us to live. The challenge of Lent is to learn to “let it be,” to learn to accept God’s compassion for us and for our neighbor. God “lets us be” so that we might return to God’s grace and healing. In doing so, God is also encouraging us to “let others be” so they might also be healed and bear fruit.

This has to be about the hardest request most of us will ever have to bear: to let others be themselves. To let others bear the fruit that God has blessed them to bear. In our highly rational and extremely advanced technological societies, in spite of all of our human accomplishments, we have been unable to overcome our own self-centeredness and separation from genuine community.

The one word today that no one wants to speak or hear about is the little three letter word “sin.” But until we realize that we are broken and sinful, we will also not be able to repent and seek God’s grace. Until we see that we are just as sinful as others, as the Galileans that Jesus mentioned, we will not be able to accept others for who they are.

As Danez Smith writes, “let ruin end here” – let our human brokenness end here so that we might find the honey of God’s grace. Smith’s words “where there was once slaughter” – invite us to see that our killing of one another must end, to allow God’s healing to take root.

These past four weeks we have seen the brutal and relentless slaughter of the people of Ukraine by an invading Russian army. Nearly all the world recognizes that it is morally wrong to invade another nation and seek to subjugate its people, remove its government, taking away its freedom to self-determination. Russia is, of course, wrong, but this still does not remove our own need to repent and bear the fruit of good works for our neighbors.

“Do you think they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did” are words also aimed at us, for we live in a country that often says lofty things about freedom, yet continues to treat some people as less than free. The sin of oppressing sisters and brothers because of the color of their skin or because of their gender and identity continues to also exist in our own nation. We cannot seek to pray for and stand in solidarity with sisters and brothers in another place who are mistreated, without also standing alongside those in our own communities who continue to struggle for their own rights to grow and “to be” as God has created them to be.

Jesus’ words unmask us in our own sinfulness: *“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”* Jesus’ words remind us that the problem is our sinful separation from God and from our neighbor, whom we often let perish in the wilderness.

During Lent, Jesus holds up a mirror, asking us to look at ourselves. We are like the fig tree. We may be like a tree that outwardly looks healthy and yet does not bear the fruit of repentance and good works. We may be like a tree whose branches and leaves are withered and dying because the soil of

the world, the cares and tragedies of life, cause us to wither and die. Jesus, the vine dresser, offers to care for our hearts, forgive our sins, and restore our community with God and with our neighbors.

Danez Smith's poem speaks of "ruin and slaughter" because that is what human beings do and have done to one another for thousands of years. When will we stop? When will we say, "Enough!" When will we say, "Let it be?" – let our neighbors be who God has created them to be. When will Russia say, "Let the Ukrainians alone?" When will we treat our sisters and brothers of differing ethnicities and genders as full and fellow members of our human family? During Lent, amidst an ongoing pandemic, war and sinful divisiveness, Jesus invites us with compassion to return to him.

God is compassionate. God gives us time to grow in faith and love for others. We know that without God, we wither and die. Without God, our world is filled with ruin and slaughter. May we learn to love others, to "let them be," so that together with God we might know a land of honey, flowering fields and healing.

We don't have to perish. God's compassion heals us so that we might become healing for one another. We are not worse sinners than the Galileans Jesus spoke of; like all people, we simply need the grace of God's forgiveness.

God loves this world. When will we learn to live with love for one another? Amen.

Reading for Lenten Midweek prayer 3/23/2022

"little prayer" by Danez Smith (contemporary)

let ruin end here
let him find honey
where there was once a slaughter
let him enter the lion's cage
& find a field of lilacs
let this be the healing
& if not let it be



James Tissot, “The Vine Dresser and the Fig Tree” (1886-1894)
Brooklyn Museum, New York (public domain)

James Tissot (1836-1902) was a French painter and contemporary of the Impressionists, whose own style matured toward realism. Beginning in Paris and later moving to London, he was a successful painter of fashionable society. However, after moving back to Paris in 1885, Tissot underwent a revival of his Catholic faith and until death, painted a series of 365 scenes from the life of Christ, and also began a series of Old Testament paintings that he was unable to complete. His paintings of the life of Christ were purchased by the Brooklyn Museum in 1900.