

Sermon: Year C, II Lent
Texts: Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Luke 13:22-35

What does it mean to strive after something, even in the face of utter futility? What does such a task ask of us, and how can we imagine doing so without falling into despair? The Gospel we have heard this morning has posed these questions.

The passage from Luke is striking in its contrasts. Jesus was, on one hand, direct in his commands. Faith, he declared, does not exist apart from endeavor and the constant work of transforming not only your own life but the world around you as well. There is much to be done. And there is no time to lose. Yet, in the very same moment, on the other hand, he wept for the city of Jerusalem, for it was, as it remains to this day, the ultimate sign and symbol of our ineradicable brokenness. Herod, ever the politician, maneuvering for public support, wanted to kill Jesus. So it was reported. So it was rumored, in that city so riddled with intrigue and suspicions, many of which were, and are still, violently contested.

This can't be blithely passed over. Luke is emphatic in pointing out that Jerusalem, the very center of divine promise, is the very place that most ferociously resists every single prophet. Intended to be the beacon of God's blessing and peace, it physically represents, instead, the wounds of our own incurable sectarian hatreds and conquests. Jesus knew the tragic story of Jerusalem's past. He knew, no less, that Jerusalem would angrily reject him too, no matter what he said, or did, or tried, in every way, to convey in mercy, hope, or love. How do you strive to make a way for grace, when you know that, inevitably, it will be greeted only with rage and spite?

Two thousand years later, nothing has changed. Jerusalem remains the epicenter of competing religious claims and international instability. Everyone in the world speaks of peace there, but, within its walls, peace is simply incomprehensible, all too literally, a term without meaning.

In a similar manner, if the conflict over Jerusalem isn't problem enough, what about the genocide in Darfur. We all know it's happening, but no one can muster response enough to stop it – much like Rwanda before it, and Bosnia and Cambodia before these.

We are, by far, the world's richest nation, but we seem completely stymied by the entrenched urban poverty within our own borders. In spite of all our wealth, we seem incapable of erasing the large underclass of wasted lives spent begging or hustling on our streets.

And each one of us probably knows someone who cannot escape the chasms of addiction, no matter how much counseling is engaged, no matter how many penalties are imposed, no matter what kind of interventions are carefully planned and executed. Still, everything can fall to nothing, and everyone is rendered helpless.

It's Lent; a time to be brutally honest. Futility is not a negotiable word. Many things in life can't be mended, or fixed, or resolved, regardless of how hard we try. Our greatest efforts often prove to be wholly ineffective. Yet, nonetheless, we experience, just as deeply, the continual need to respond, to expend ourselves, sometimes exhaustingly, sometimes to the very last. Is this just tragic, the horrible luck that befalls some? Or is there another way, more profound, that we can understand our situation? Luke has put this before us.

Formulating an answer is not easy – it shouldn't be, given the stakes, but I think it might well be considered in this way. In our Christian faith, there are two great commandments, which means two ways by which to form and inform the entirety of our lives. The first commandment is that we love God with all our heart and mind and strength. The second is that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Two commandments immediately put us at risk of divided loyalties, and Christianity has often been split by the overemphasis of one and the dismissal of the other. Some choose to follow the first commandment to the exclusion of the second, and as a consequence, faith has become mere spirituality, the exercise of a nice, private aesthetic. God is a means of escape, a retreat from the world into a hallowed space never entangled in the travails of common life. Peace is interpreted as an inner feeling with no real outer expression. Grace becomes a form of self-satisfaction, the self application of esteem, and prayer becomes just another term for personal meditation.

Others have become so earnest in pursuing the second commandment that the first is largely forgotten. Faith is translated, almost exclusively, into social action, and there is no lack of causes to pursue. The usual laundry list is familiar: the scourge of racism, the injustice of a thousand different forms of discrimination, the conflicts of nations, the oppression of debt, the degradation of disease, the damage wrought by the lack of a quality education. This list has no real end, and the vast majority of the world's seven billion people would have a place on it. Under the pressure of so many needs, God tends to become marginalized, a reference to purely generic term, being everywhere the same catalyst to action, but marketed in various cultures and places under different brand names. And the hope, often expressed, is simply that, with enough of our own effort, with enough protest, compassion, and visionary action, we ourselves can change the world. Divisions will cease. Peace will come. Communities will be healed. Which may be true for some, thankfully.

But for many millions of others, there is no answer here, only cold fate. Their lives come and go without neighbors to help, and all the social action undertaken provides them no comfort at all. They are the unlucky. To take this commandment seriously, absent the first, would, by rights, lead only to exhaustion and collapse. History shows that futility's shadow is very long.

These two great commandments, however, are inextricably bound together. To love God is not an excuse for dreaming or stepping, in blissful moments, out of the mire of human concerns, preferring a fanciful paradise. The entire canon of Scripture attests, rather, that the central will of God himself is to be thoroughly mired in relationship with us. Read the Biblical texts. They never peel off into exotic mantras and utopian, diaphanous visions. They are, in fact, and sometimes dismayingly, starkly descriptive of the ugly struggles of humanity. There is nothing abstract in the command to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength – for it entails that we perceive all creation as the material expression of God's passion and the entirety of our lives, now and in every moment, as our return of his devotion.

In light of this, loving our neighbors as ourselves, then, is far different than just a moral, social contract between us. What is really asked here, is that we live together mirroring, reflecting, God's own love shown to us. And this point is key: salvation, thus, is not our responsibility. This is God's to accomplish. And therefore, this command is not the burden of justice placed squarely on our shoulders in the face of conditions that we cannot correct. It is rather our freedom to love one another openly and gladly, under the grace of the assurance that, already and irrevocably, God in Jesus has made himself a neighbor to all, and no circumstance or fate, no imposition of any injustice, can sever the bond of love that God has established. Our chief obligation is not to painstakingly try to put community in order;

it is to be a joyful communion, seeing, first, in every person's face the one for whom God has risked and achieved everything.

If we cease to love God, we lose this joy, and the weight of futility descends upon us. And all too frequently, this has been the great mistake of American Christianity. The whole message of the church has become the weight of the world that suffocates, rather than the absolute freedom to love that gives breath and life.

The infamous narrow door to which Jesus referred is not, for each of us, a minimum standard of good behavior, necessary to earn God's favor. The narrow door – let's be very clear – is Jesus himself. And, thus, our only striving is to see how, through him, God has eternally changed the entire world. In Jesus, all futility has come to an end. That deserves our constant attention. In him, God has shown us the future of all creation, where every ending is met with resurrection. In him we live and move and have our being. In him we are granted, no matter the place we occupy, the space to rejoice in the triumph of grace that encompasses all things and every one of us. And, therefore, in him, in precisely the embodied, incarnate rejoicing we may undertake, we may live for the world in unbridled fashion.

This better mystery is both our life and our destiny – in every place of futility, resurrection instead.

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