

“Digging Deeper”

Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55:1-9 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 23, 2025

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might enter more deeply into communion with you and embrace your mercy. In Jesus' name, Amen.

As we move through these six weeks of Lent, we are looking at our scripture lessons to see what they can teach us about what church is for. Presumably, you have reasons why you come here on Sunday, hopefully something more compelling than habit. But it's a good idea for us to occasionally reflect together on what we're here for – the purpose that draws us together – to make sure we're on track.

The “why” found in today's readings has two parts, a basic tenet and a primary example. We can find the summary there at the end of the passage from Isaiah: we come to church because “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my way, says the Lord.” We come to church to be re-oriented into the ways of God. There is too much out there and too much swirling around in our minds and guts that tries to pull us away from the path of Christ. So faithfulness requires that we gather here to open ourselves to the repairing work of the Holy Spirit. We come to confess that our thoughts have not aligned with the mind of God. We come to be healed and set right. We come to be nudged back into the paths of righteousness for the sake of Christ Jesus. We come because we want to change our ways, change them back so they reflect the ways of God once again.

This idea from Isaiah that our thoughts are generally not the way God thinks is brought up again when Jesus appears on the scene and engages in conversation trying to nudge people back onto the path of God. When he was being most clear about it he would say something like, “You have heard that it is said... But I say to you...” He doesn’t use that phrase in our reading today from Luke, but the idea is the same. And here is where we enter into the second part of today’s lesson. One, our ways are not God’s ways. And two, God’s way is always mercy.

There is, of course, a whole other thing going on here. These terrible stories are gruesome but not unrelatable: the pointed cruelty of mixing the blood of Galilean pilgrims with their sacrifices, the awful tragedy of a tower collapsing and killing people – our modern lives contain such ugliness and pain as well. Part of why we come together as church is to help make sense of such suffering, and when we can’t make sense of it, to find solace in the presence of God that helps us increase our tolerance for senselessness. We are a community of prayer precisely because life is hard and we need to surround one another with the power of the Holy Spirit in order to survive it.

But again, “your thoughts are not my thoughts,” says God. And Jesus is trying to help us see how our efforts to make sense of pain so easily go astray. Bad things happening to people is not punishment, he says. Stop assuming that is what is going on. Stop trying to convince yourselves that those people who suffered were measurably worse people than you are, in order to help yourselves feel protected from what happened to them. That’s not how God works.

What Jesus is trying to explain by correcting our efforts at making meaning out of suffering, Isaiah comes at from another direction entirely. “Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.”

Rather than suffering, Isaiah is trying to help us make sense – God’s sense – of abundance. The world may dourly insist that “there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” but God says, “Come and eat, buy wine and milk without money!” God’s way is always mercy. Grace is not given to us because we deserve it. Grace is not something we can earn. Grace is free lunch, free milk, free wine. Grace is radical, satiating, delightful abundance.

And not just that: grace is radical, compassionate, nurturing patience. “Your ways are not my ways,” says God. When the landowner condemns the young tree to the fire, the gardener pleads, “One more year!” You all know that I know nothing about plants, but the internet tells me that fig trees can generally be expected to produce fruit within the first three to five years. So the standard that vineyard owner was trying to enforce wasn’t even fair or realistic. The gardener knew that. Jesus’ listeners likely knew that. And it feels familiar, doesn’t it? Somehow, we’re expected to hold down a job, eat healthy, get plenty of exercise and fresh air, build up our savings, spend time with our families, volunteer at church, participate in civic activities,

have a social life, and so much more. But we've only got 24 hours each day. We cannot do it all. And yet, the bills continue to demand to be paid. We are increasingly convinced the system is rigged against us.

So what a relief it can be to come to church and hear that the Gardener is pleading for us, "One more year!" And if you know Jesus like I know Jesus, you know he'll say it again next year. I can redeem this fruitless tree, he promises, even when our life feels like a pile of dry branches fit only for the fire. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my way, says the Lord." God's way is always mercy. God's way always offers another chance. God's way may involve taking the long way round, but that's probably because God knew you needed a chance to walk it out.

When we say that we come to church to realign our ways with the way of God, part of what we're saying is that the world is constantly pushing and pulling at us to deny mercy at every turn. God's way is always mercy. God's way is always compassionate. There is much we struggle to comprehend. We want to take the brokenness of the world and shake some sense into it. But Jesus calls us to hold the suffering of the world tenderly. If we can do that, we can find ways to respond with love and generosity, rather than getting caught up trying to apply logic to unreasonable situations.

How do we keep our hearts and minds tender? By gathering together in the name of Jesus and praying for the Holy Spirit to move in within our souls, softening and strengthening our compassion that we might be more fit vessels for the grace of

God. This is why we come to church. Because we know that our thoughts are just as likely to be our own small and petty judgments as they are to reflect the abundant mercy of God. And we want to tip the scales toward faithfulness. Lord, we want to be like Jesus in our hearts. Form us, re-form us, un-deform us. Re-shape our thoughts to align with the mind of God. Transform our ways to reflect the way of Christ.

At its best, church can be a beacon of mercy and compassion in a world that often seems to prefer sitting in bitter, greedy darkness, striking out thoughtlessly at any vulnerable thing that passes by. When the world condemns and declares something a “waste of soil,” we can be there to cry out, “No! One more year!” When the world tries to take food away from the hungry, we can be there to cry out, “No! Come and eat! Here is the Bread of Life, broken for you!” When the world insists that those who are suffering deserve what they are enduring, we can stand up and speak out and say, “No! These are God’s beloved; you will not harm them any longer.”

Coming to church to align our thoughts with God’s is not, you see, simply for the purpose of making us more holy. This is how our God is bringing healing and redemption into the world. Through our realignment, through our reformation, through our prayers and the actions our prayers lead us into. What is the church for? It is a vessel of God’s mercy, for the sake of the world. Amen.