

Third Sunday in Lent, Year C

And Jesus asked, "Those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, No."

Today, the scriptures ask us to look at the question of sin and redemption. Now, I don't know about your experience, but in my life, the metaphors for looking at sin and redemption that I've heard most often have to do with reward and punishment. Reward and punishment is a basic fact of life! In San Francisco, not far from my old home, there was a pastry store called "Just Desserts." It was a clever name with more than one level of meaning. "You've been good. So, treat yourself! You deserve a reward." But many of us would also think: "Too many of *these* rewards and my just desserts will be a couple of extra pounds around the mid-section." The law of reward and punishment, of cause and effect, of action and consequence, is part of how we experience life. To every cause there is an effect. To every action, a reaction. And many people also think of religion in terms of reward and punishment. You behave well, you go to heaven. You behave badly, and you go somewhere else.

But our text from Luke today is part of a consistent message from Jesus in the Gospels that pushes us to look beyond the simplistic reward and punishment approach. To look beyond just heaven or hell and to ask ourselves fundamental questions about salvation—what it means and who it's for. What we learn from this story where a tower fell on some people, says Jesus, is not that *some* sinners were worse than others and deserved their punishment. What we learn is a lesson about God's patience with our failings.

In Hindu-Buddhist theology the doctrine of Karma is sometimes thought of as a strict law of reward and punishment—depending on how you behave in life, you either progress or digress in your next incarnation. But Karma can also be thought of as having to do more with a learning process in which the goal is growth—a kind of “end that never ends.” In the same way, the journey toward *understanding* our relationship with God is the goal to which God pushes us throughout our lives.

The issue is not whether or not we are perfect, it is how we go about our *efforts* to do good, to discover and do God's will, to make life beautiful. Because if we only do our best in order to *earn* an eternal reward from God, we eventually realize that even our best is not enough to make us or our world perfect.

The Christian doctrine of sin, contrary to what many people think, is not an overly negative assessment of human nature. It is simply an honest recognition of the seemingly never ending tension between great expectations and the less than perfect realities of life. As Saint Paul says, “The good that I would do, I do not do, and the evil that I would not do, that I do.” It’s the eternal human quandry. In the face of such difficult challenges of what it means to be human, talking about mere reward and punishment seems woefully inadequate and shallow.

Most people are not pathologically anti-social. Most of us want to do good, to do our best, to make life better for everyone. So the Bible, like other great writings, both secular and sacred, offers insights into what it means to be ethical and good. But the Gospel of Jesus is primarily interested in the *attitude* we take toward our efforts to do those “good works.” Why we do them, is what matters. Are we doing them out of a desire to gain some ultimate reward? Or are we doing them because we know it is God’s deepest wish that we do so? Do we do it to get into heaven? Or do we do it because we trust that what God wants for us is best for us and because we know this is what God wants us to do?

As many of you know, I participate in an ecumenical clergy group here in Redwood City. And we have been publicizing monthly events sponsored by our group of faith communities every few months. There's one coming up, in fact, a week from Tuesday. You can find information about it in your bulletin insert today. Anyway, as I have engaged in theological conversations with some of my more Protestant colleagues I have actually found it helpful to wander through some of my old theology books and rediscover some of the wisdom of the Reformation Theologians.

Martin Luther once described faith as a good work! But he didn't mean that "believing the right doctrines about Jesus" was the ultimate good thing we could do to depend our relationship with God. You see, Luther was fully aware that to speak of accepting Jesus by faith was a *huge* contradiction. When we talk about "accepting Jesus," we automatically move beyond logic, because it is God and God's action alone that brings about our reconciliation with God—not our act of accepting Jesus into our hearts. By calling our faith in Jesus both a good work and a free gift from God, by emphasizing that God accepting us is more important than our accepting God, by recognizing that God's free will to save us is more important than our free will to accept God's gift, Luther was struggling to move beyond the simple formula of reward and punishment to a greater awareness of how God's love works in our lives. Luther was struggling to re-interpret or to develop an understanding of what grace and faith really mean.

This is a part of what Jesus was talking about when he said “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Unless we turn away from trying to “earn” God’s acceptance and earn a heavenly rewards, our efforts will simply end in despair.

Perhaps the biggest problem people have with this emphasis on the grace of God is that it seems to raise the controversial issue of what in theological circles is called “universalism.” That is to say that in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, ALL have been saved—whether they “believe” in Jesus or not. I once preached a sermon on the ultimate redemptive power of God's grace. One parishioner later confronted me angrily saying, “If there’s no hell, then there's no heaven!” Hm. Interesting concept. Another complained to me that she refused to believe that God could save or redeem Adolph Hitler.

The reason the theology of universalism bothers so many people is that it seems to turn “grace freely given” into “grace purchased cheaply.” If God’s grace is “too freely given” then the suffering and death of Jesus is cheapened. You might put it this way: “Why try to be a moral and good person if we’re all going to the same place anyway?” That’s universalism. It’s a difficult theological dilemma for any Christian to wrestle with. But the opposite is just as difficult.

So are we supposed to believe that a loving God would *allow* some of his children to be damned? Or that the son of God would take the extreme measure of dieing on the cross for our sins and that in some cases, that sacrifice would not be sufficient? I'm not sure I can live with that either. So, where does that leave us?

In his article "Does Anyone Out There Care Anymore Whether People Believe in Jesus?", James Burtness attempted to show how the grace of God is not totally free: "Grace," he writes, "has been hammered at people in a manner so simplistic that they have become unable to distinguish between taking credit for their faith and taking responsibility for it. He felt that if we only take responsibility (not credit) for our salvation, then we will not have compromised the emphasis on "salvation by grace alone."

Coming at the issue from a different perspective, another theologian wrote: "We can't choose not to be sinful, but we can choose to accept Jesus." Another standard way of trying to solve this dilemma is simply to say that if my relationship with God is deepened, it is all God's doing; but if I continue to drift further from God (my definition of sin) then it is all *my* doing.

Typically, this attempt to explain how grace is both totally free but at the same time not totally free, is combined with the observation that while God may want to redeem everyone, God is not able to do so because some folks are just beyond redemption. The Orthodox tradition frequently states their solution to the problem this way: "God does 99% of the work and humans do 1% of the work by accepting the gift of faith." But that 1% makes all the difference. The acceptance of the gift is what makes the gift matter.

The message of the New Testament is not that we should accept certain doctrinal propositions about Jesus or follow the "spiritual laws" leading to salvation, but rather that we should struggle in joyful hope with what it means to be human and at the same time to believe that through the radical grace of God's love, we are not alone on that journey!

If all this has just been too confusing for you, just hear this. The one thing I know is that on our journey of faith, we must somehow learn what it means to say that the final word on what we call "salvation" belongs to God and to God alone. You and I cannot pretend to know who is "lost" and who is "saved." Or even, for that matter, what being "lost" or "saved" necessarily means. We can only celebrate the Gospel message of the unconditional love and grace of God shown in Jesus.

We would learn a great deal about the meaning of our faith if we asked ourselves how important our religion would still be to us if there were no heaven to gain or hell to flee from. If we think that “being a good Christian” means giving up pleasures now for the sake of heavenly pleasures later on, then we are likely to get angry when we are asked “what if there is no heaven or hell?” We want our self-denial to be rewarded and the self-indulgence of evil-doers to be punished. But if the values and notions of goodness proclaimed by the Gospel are true, don't they have to be valid regardless of whether or not heaven is a part of the equation? If what the Christian faith is really all about is learning to live in the tension between living “morally” and living “in love”—isn't it more than worthwhile to participate in this faith even if there is no “next life?” I wonder about people who are disgruntled with this world and can't wait for heaven. What makes us think we are going to be able to appreciate the next life if we have so little appreciation for the only life that we know so far, namely, this life here and now? Christianity does not teach that we are put on this earth merely to earn a heavenly reward. We are here to celebrate life, love, creativity, faith and hope. And to give thanks to the God who gives us all that, and more

Some don't care for her brand of comedy, but in her book, *Enter Talking*, Joan Rivers shares some profound insights. She writes: "The only way you can go into show business is to expect no reward at all ... The paradox is: If you are not in it for the rewards, they are more likely to come to you ... If you must go into the arts, go into them for yourself alone ... be willing to paint a picture and just hang it on your wall." How true that is. And not only for art, but for faith. If you're not willing to have faith in God just because your heart tells you it's true, then it may not be worth having at all.

Life is more about unconditional love than it is about success and rewards. Being loved and accepted just as we are must come first, with accomplishments, including "moral" accomplishments, a distant second.

To believe in the free will gift of God's grace is not to ignore sin and evil. But it does imply having a serious rebuttal to those who object to the possibility of universal salvation out of their own desire to see sinners punished. To believe in the free will gift of God's grace is to be aware of the ultimate paradox of judgement and God's love. It is, simply, in the most profound sense, to value the positive over the negative, to value people over their accomplishments, to value love over logic!

Life is a paradox. But so what—so is making the first to be last, the poor to be rich and bringing life out of death. And frankly, I like it that way. Amen.