Thoughts for “Fertilize the Roots” sermon

Luke 13: 1-9

This is the season of Lent, when we prepare ourselves for Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Christ’s life has a trajectory in Christian thought – he is born in Nazareth, the city of David, and he dies in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish people. Lent is the journey towards Jerusalem, toward’s Christ’s willing sacrifice on the cross. But along the way, he keeps teaching and keeps performing miracles, hoping to open more eyes to deeper truths before his life and ministry come to an end.

In today’s scripture reading, he is answering questions about two groups of Jews who have come to an untimely end. Back then, it was assumed that if anyone died an unfortunate or unusual death, it was probably a punishment from God for their sins. The first example is a strange one: some men have been killed by Pilate, who mingled their blood with the sacrifices they were offering. This would have rendered the sacrifices unclean and useless, so they died in a state of sin. There is no other mention of this event in the Bible or the historical record.* The second example is of a famous tower that fell on some Jews. It is assumed that they must have been sinners, and were killed by God.

The people asking these questions hope that Jesus has some inside information on why these men had been singled out to die in such strange ways. What was their sin? But as often happens, Jesus turns this into a teaching moment. He shifts the question from the victims of these violent acts back over to the people who have asked the questions. He says that these victims were no different from anyone else in town. If you don’t repent of your sins, you will be struck down, too. By what? The implication is death, the death that comes to everyone. Jesus doesn’t see these falling towers as punishments, God is not an assassin. But all of us die, and to die while still wedded to our sinning ways is not a good way to die.

But what is sin then? In Christ’s time, it was assumed that everyone sinned. Jews had to obey over 600 laws, from not eating shellfish to the right times to have sex after giving birth. There were lots of ways of disobeying God’s laws, all of which qualified as sins. The solution was to repent and offer sacrifices at certain times of the year. But when Jesus speaks of sin in the New Testament, he shifts the focus. Sin is no longer breaking rules, but rather any act or even thought of harming a neighbour. Jesus says that it is a sin to even mentally desire a neighbour’s wife[1], or to harbour anger against another person.[2] Sin is as much a state of mind to Jesus as it is a list of forbidden acts.

This dichotomy of mental states and acts is interesting. There are lots of rules we are expected to obey in modern life. Every road has a speed limit. If you’re driving down the Gardiner

[1] Matthew 5:27-28
[2] Matthew 5:22.

Expressway downtown, it is 90 kilometers an hour[3]. During rush hour, you may be lucky to get anywhere near that speed. But when traffic is light, most people drive faster than 90 kilometers an hour. You may have, too. I would be surprised if any of us have gone home and felt guilty about that. There are lots of rules that all of us break, but they don't induce any kind of mental anguish. We also don't spend much time dreaming of speeding, and then acting on it with any kind of delight. Clearly, secular rules don't have an emotional component to them in the same way moral ones do.

If a person has an affair during a marriage, that sounds more sinful. It is clearly prohibited in the ten commandments. It is also against most wedding vows. An affair is a broken promise, usually also a form of deception, and a deep rupturing of a relationship. It is something that a person may imagine and fantasize about first. It is both an act and a state of mind. Most of all, it feels sinful, and that may even be part of its attraction. A thrill that comes from breaking the rules.

Murder, theft, adultery – they all involve a changed state of mind as well as prohibited acts. Like speed limits, they break rules, but in a way that gets more to the core of our being. These acts are described as sins because they are all a form of theft, the taking of something or someone who does not belong to us. That life is not yours to end. That person is not yours to have an affair with, they have pledged their being to someone else. That shirt in the store is not yours to steal. Sins involve breaking a relationship, an act of defiance and violence against existing bonds.

Lying is also considered a sin. But many of us tell what are called little white lies. If you ask someone if you look overweight in a pair of pants, there is only right answer, and it is not always the truth. But we say the little lie anyway, because we can sense that what's important is the relationship. Little white lies are the exception that prove the rule: sins are about relationships, and so sometimes we will lie a little bit to maintain a relationship. Most of the time, sins rupture relationships.

If you think back to the ten commandments, they are all about relationships. The first five are about the ultimate relationship, our connection to God. Love God, make no images of God, honour the Lord's day of rest – our existence starts with a relationship with God. Afterall, God made us, and keeps us alive, every second we exist. Then the next five commandments are about how we should relate to our parents, our spouses, our neighbours. Sinful acts are about rupturing those key relationships.

But that begs the question, why do we want to sin at all? Many sins are imagined long before they are committed. Christ warns us that we are already sinning even in the contemplation of the act. Is it healthy to imagine sleeping with someone else's partner? Or to wish someone dead? Or to think about different ways to cheat on our taxes or steal someone else's property?

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[3] https://www.toronto.ca/311/knowledgebase/kb/docs/articles/transportation-services/district-transportation-services/traffic-operations/minimum-speed-limit-on-streets.html

In Greek, the word for sin is the same word that is used for missing a target's bullseye.[4] It means to be off center, not to be dirty or disgusting, but to be off kilter. In Buddhism, there is a slightly different metaphor. The Buddha spoke of sinful suffering using the metaphor of a wheel. Sin is when the wheel's axle is off center, so the wheel jerks as it turns.[5] Sin is being off center, out of kilter, not just in what you do, but how you feel.

Most sins start in the mind, and they have a way or souring our view of life. We imagine sinful acts because we don't feel that what we have is enough. There is a lack inside of us which we imagine will be filled if we could just have that affair, teach that person a lesson, take that stuff, have more money. Sinful thoughts and desires are a symptom of a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction with who we are. We may resent what someone else has, because if we had that, we would be re-centered, we would be fulfilled.

Yet that sense that our internal needs can be met by taking something from someone else is a dangerous illusion. There are very few murderers who reach inner peace after they have killed someone. The problem was never just outside, it was inside, too. And that inner hurt, that inner emptiness and sense of lack, cannot be solved by changing someone else, or taking something. Unfortunately, when we discover the hunger and emptiness persists, many people will just try again, hoping another sinful act will solve the problem. They don't see that the real problem is internal.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus is asked about people who seem to have been punished by God for their sins. A tower fell on them, were they sinners? Jesus tells the people around them that they are sinners too, even if just regular death befalls them. You need to repent, Jesus says. Repent doesn't mean saying I am sorry. Repent means to have a change of mind. To get out of that sinning state of mind that we have been talking about. But how?

Jesus answers that question with a a parable. A vineyard owner notices that there is a fig tree on his land which has not born fruit for three years. He asks the vine dresser, why should we keep this tree if it never gives us figs? The vine dresser replies, give it another year, let me dig a trench around it and fill it with fertilizer. If it doesn't bear fruit next year, then we can cut it down.

Jesus tells this parable to people who think that God is a harsh judge who makes towers fall on sinners. They expect God to simply cut down the infertile tree. But Jesus introduces the vineyard dresser as the other face of God. The merciful one. In our day and age, we like to think that we can solve all of our own problems. "I am enough", as the saying goes. It's interesting that in this parable, the vine dresser doesn't say, let's just leave the fig tree and give it another chance. Maybe it will fix itself with more time. Instead, he says, give the tree another year, and I will give it some outside help. Maybe then it will bear some fruit, and we won't need to cut it down.

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[4] *Hamartia* in Greek. http://www.truthmagazine.com/archives/volume27/GOT027122.html

[5] *Dukha:* Judith Simmer-Brown, "Inviting the Demon," *Parabola Magazine*, Summer 1997, p.14.

One of the things about parables is that they always have a detail which isn't quite right. Something a bit out of the ordinary. It's a signal that this story is meant to be understood symbolically, rather than literally. In this parable, it is the action of the vine dresser when he helps the tree. In a vineyard, the vine dresser is the one who prunes the grapevines so they will bear fruit.(John 15:1-27) So, you would think that he would trim the branches of the fig tree to make it bear fruit. But instead, he digs a trench around the tree, and fills it with fertilizer. He ignores the branches, and goes right to the roots. That's where he puts in the fertilizer. The problem with this tree is in its roots. Once they are well fed with fertilizer, then this tree will bear fruit on its branches.

The parable is saying that when we talk about sin, it is not the acts we commit that are the real problem, it's the root of our being. Sin is what happens when your inner being feels barren and infertile. When you are starved of something you need. The parable presents Jesus as the helpful gardener who wants to feed your soul so that emptiness will go away. To do this, he goes to the roots of your being and encourages us to look inside, to ask ourselves, where are we hungry, where are we starved? Then, he provides a promise. God does not want you to fail. God will not cut you down or cause a tower to fall on you. God offers you a love which you may not think you deserve. A love and care which can feed your roots, which can bring you back to life again, even when you feel dried up inside.

How do you get to feel that love? It's pretty simple: just ask for it. Say to God I need your help. I feel empty inside. Try giving thanks for simple things, remind yourself that your life is not as empty as it seems. That even when you are down, you are still blessed with sunlight, fresh air to breathe, people who love you. If you do this everyday, you will start to feel the fertilizer around your roots. As you realize that your cup is always more than half full, even on the bad days, that sense of emptiness which can lead to rash, hurtful acts will be reduced. It sounds too good to be true, but there's all sorts of science to back it up. People who feel optimistic recover from illnesses quicker and live longer than pessimists. Jesus is encouraging his followers to realize that God is always there feeding your roots, your inner being, giving you more time to bear fruit.

And what about other people who sin? They are the same as us. When they do hurtful things to us, it is really about them. They are trying to fix an inner hurt, a feeling of emptiness. But God does not want to give up on them. God is "rooting" for them, too. God the vine dresser wants to give them another chance to bear fruit, to stop sinning. So, we are encouraged to see them as God does – as a tree with promise. One worth waiting for. How many people have celebrated their friends who did not give up on them? "You were the only one who believed in me." Sometimes, God is the only one who believes in you. But it helps if others do, too, especially when times are hard. For the deep truth about sin is that it is not a permanent state, not a brand or a label that we are stuck with. It is a state of the soul that can be changed. With time, with love applied to the roots. It is something we all deserve, especially when we are making mistakes. Amen.