

“Difficult Truths”

Isaiah 55:6-11; I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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This message, “Difficult Truths,” asserts that God judges us; holds us accountable for right and wrong; that “good enough” isn’t in the Kingdom of God; and that this is **good** news for us.

Every Saturday evening, thousands of people across the United States tune in to their local National Public Radio station to listen to Garrison Keillor’s show “A Prairie Home Companion.” (By the way, Mr. Keillor will be at Southern CT State University the evening of April 14.) Set in mythical Lake Wobegon, MN, his program is sponsored by imaginary local businesses: Bertha’s Kitty Boutique, Powdermilk Biscuits and the Chatterbox Café. The one I recalled for today, however, is “Ralph’s Pretty Good Groceries.” The commercials remind listeners that if Ralph’s doesn’t carry what you want, you probably don’t need it anyway. The message underneath is that any normal, reasonable citizen of Lake Wobegon will be satisfied with what Ralph has to offer.

Keillor taps into beliefs about what is “good enough” for reasonable people and “better than” the alternative. Our culture, for example, often says we should not judge or condemn; yet everything from reality television to the recent conversation on gun laws and the Second Amendment points to us indeed measuring goodness and normalcy against what we consider “less good” or “less normal.” Comparisons in the public sphere—political poll ratings or some international conflict, can be summarized by “Well, we did do *this* but at least we didn’t do *that*.”

We sometimes do this personally. *“Well, I may have fudged on my tax return but it’s nothing compared to the big companies.”* *“Well, yes, sometimes I lose my temper at home but it’s not like I hit my spouse or anything.”* *“No, I haven’t taken on any Lenten disciplines, but I attend church regularly and try to lead decent*

life. I never claimed to be Mother Teresa.” My older brother, an alcoholic sober for 30 years (one day at a time), says that when he drank he would always surround himself with people who drank more. He says, *“I knew I didn’t have a problem because Joe always drank more than I did.”*

Yes, of course, *God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*, as we heard last week. Yet we are accountable for our lives. This was the genius of early Methodism, “growing in holiness of heart and life” as we seek to better express the *imago Dei*, the “image of God, in us.

Today’s scriptures express God’s judgment in several ways. *“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways”* declares Isaiah. The Corinthians took such pride in their gifts that they thought sexual mores did not apply to them. Recounting ancient Israel’s punishment, Paul warns them in their pride *“So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.”* Jesus, in the Gospel, offers a warning to those of us who the sinfulness of others is indicated by the degree of adversity they face. He refers to a massacre right in the temple by the Roman governor Pilate’s soldiers against worshippers—we need think only of the Sikh temple in Wisconsin, Sandy Hook, Aurora and Littleton, Colorado, among many similar crimes—to tell those in his hearing that they were no more virtuous than the ones who died. Living or dying, we are accountable for our lives.

He illustrates: Got a fig tree that isn’t producing? Give it a little more time, but not endless time. The Romans taxed the Jews on the basis of the number of trees on their property. Practically speaking, then, the only trees worthy having were those producing income. That is why the overwhelming number of trees in Israel in Jesus’ day were figs and olives: they generated a cash crop. It was common sense: if a tree didn’t produce, you cut it down.

So an important part of the Gospel is that God *does* judge us; holds us accountable for right and wrong; that there is no such thing as “good enough” in the Kingdom of God. I also said this was *good* news, and it is, and I’ll get to that in a minute.

But to get the good news we have to get out of our denial. Carol Noren, a Methodist preaching professor, tells of a driver given a speeding ticket on a stretch of road he drove regularly. He tried to talk his way out of the ticket with, “*But officer, the last two times I was pulled over I was just given a warning. Couldn’t you do that today?*” The officer asked “*You think that would be fair?*” “*Yes!*” exclaimed the driver, *very fair!*” The officer answered, “*If you want me to be fair, I should write you a ticket for speeding today plus tickets for the last two times you were pulled over.*”

Whether justice and accountability is severe is a matter of perspective, isn’t it? With his permission I tell this story Pastor Hal told at the Valentine’s Dinner Dance. A couple in their 60’s celebrated their 40th anniversary on Valentine’s Day. Suddenly “Poof!” appeared a good fairy who declared “*To celebrate four decades of love I will grant you each one wish.*” The wife said “*I would like to take my husband on an around-the-world cruise.*” “*Done!*” said the good fairy. The husband replied “*I’d like to take the cruise with a wife 30 years younger.*” “*Done!*” replied the fairy, and the man was 90. When they are out of line we want justice, but when it’s us we want mercy!

But accountability and pursuing holy living is **good** news. Look at your neighbor. Go on! Take a look. We look pretty good, pretty holy. (Although years ago the Rev. Dick Francis [may he rest in peace] came to my church in Queens as an older man and said to my congregation, “*You’re probably thinking ‘My, how he’s aged.’* He continued “*Well, you don’t look so hot yourself!*”)

But generally we look pretty good, so good that people who haven’t been in church in a while will say that don’t belong because there isn’t a place for them among such virtuous people.

Yet we know that isn't so. We have all sinned and only a physician with skills and knowledge can detect that pathology.

Jesus is that physician. He sees our true condition but is more wonderful than any human doctor because he himself is the cure. What is more, our Redeemer is eager to give himself that none should perish. Like the best parents, doctors, teachers and other helpers, he tells us the truth about our condition while offering himself to help us change and be healed.

That is why difficult truths are good news, because God's yearning, expressed in these same scriptures, is not condemnation but salvation. Isaiah declares that when we turn, God will have mercy and abundantly pardon. Paul assures the Corinthians God can provide an escape from self-deception and temptation. In the parable of the fig tree, Jesus says there is yet a season by which change is possible, because God is gracious.

Yet there is a deadline, just not given to us to know it. We need to always seek God's desires and behaviors, the core of our belief as United Methodists. We are never static with God. Either we grow in grace, in holiness, in sanctification; or we backslide, drawing away from God's demands and God's grace. Our closing hymn, words of Charles Wesley to a familiar tune, paints starkly God's call to us. Please turn to it, No. 346 in the Hymnal. It has no tune so we'll use "Take My Life and Let it Be Consecrated." We'll sing the first verse in the left column and the first and last verse in the right column. The first verse is a little tricky, so let me just sing the first two lines: (sing) Now look at vs.2:

*You, whom he ordained to be transcripts of the Trinity,
You, whom he in life doth hold, you, for whom himself was sold,
You, on whom he still doth wait, whom he would again create;
Made by him, and purchased, why, why will you forever die?*

There is no time like now to release our illusions and self-deception, to repent, to seek the Lord while he may be found; and ask for help to be the righteous and holy people he intends.