

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

February 28, 2016; the 3rd Sunday in Lent

Readings: Exodus 3:1-13; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9.

Leaning Into Grace

The time is growing short.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to face death, a death that he did not deserve...to be tried and sentenced as a criminal, when he was in fact the only one fit to be judge.

Jesus struggles to wrap his very human mind around what was happening to him---what God seemed to be asking of him, as we hear from the Gospels, as this death comes closer, as he moves closer and closer, until that night in the garden he prays to be spared the suffering, but then hands it all over to God saying “thy will be done.”

There was a way of thinking among the people of Jesus’ time, a way of thinking that continues to this day, that if bad things happen to a person, than that person deserved it or brought it on his or herself.

This was the way of thinking that made Job’s friends so impossible to bear, when they tried to explain Job’s suffering by analysing his life...he must have displeased God.

In our Gospel story for today, Jesus is approached by those around him, those who are interested in stirring up some hatred against Pilate. These people are feeling self-righteous, and they want to create more of that feeling and get Jesus on-board with it too.

“At that very time there were some present who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”

This was a horrible thing to do; terrible in that people were killed and that their blood was mixed with the blood of the sacrificial animals,

thereby desecrating the religious practice and dishonoring God.

They were probably expecting Jesus to join in their condemnation of the Romans.

But time is short; and Jesus is about the bigger picture; Jesus is about God's message for each person, so that each can become an active part of the coming of God's reign.

Thinking about others too much and criticizing them, really gets in the way of *being for* God in the world.

Nadia Bolz-Weber spoke about just this sort of thing during her talks for *WomanKind*, here in Richmond, this weekend.

She was speaking on the topic of "compassion" though she confessed to us that she had forgotten this conference was on compassion and that she isn't really very good at compassion.

But then as she thought about it some more...she got to the heart of compassion, what it means for us, how we can have it, who God is for us and for all.

As Nadia spoke about where a love for the "law" gets us, I thought of these followers of Jesus who wanted to have straightforward answers to complex problems.

Being certain about who is right and who is wrong almost always finds its origin in a love for the Law, rather than a love of grace and mercy.

There are only two ways of being or feeling when one feels justified by law and by one's own ability to follow the law/the rules/the expectations of society or expectations that we think God has for us...Nadia named those two ways of of feel as pride or despair.

Jesus gets at this issue when he starts to look at was is under the question of his followers about the Galileans who died.

"Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.
 Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on
 them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others
 living in Jerusalem?

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Now there is an urgency to what Jesus is about and what he is saying...the
 time to deal with one's own sin, regrets, problems has come.

Get real about yourselves, Jesus is saying.

And of course the community that wrote the Gospel of Luke, living after the
 resurrection in a time of trial for the nascent Jesus Movement, the
 leaders focused on repentance in a way that was intended to
 motivate. ... "unless you repent, you will perish as they
 did."

The story under that statement being, we are under pressure as a
 community, get it together.

The Gospel message that shine forth here and throughout the New
 Testament, is that God loves you and transforms you through grace,
 not your own efforts.

God's love and care is grace because it gift, not because we are good but
 because we are God's beloved---this was Nadia's big

message---and that if we know ourselves to be embraced
 and upheld by this grace, saved by it, transformed by it, then instead of
 have the choice of being prideful or despairing (despairing because
 we can never been the person we think we should be the person we think
 God wants us to be) instead of that depressing duo of pride or despair
 ...in turning from the Law to the Gospel of grace,

we have joy and humility

---and when we stop trying to keep score for others or ourselves and know
 that in all of our brokenness we are loved and chosen by God---in
 having that compassion for ourselves---we can have
 compassion for others.

Repentance is still a good thing...but from what sort of stance do we repent?

Nadia did such a great job of embodying her message that we should not take ourselves too seriously, which she named as having compassion for ourselves.

We heard Nadia speak Friday night and then again yesterday morning...she told us that after the Friday night session, she and her traveling companion went to eat and that when they came back to their car, exhausted from being awake since 3:30am that day and working, a truck had blocked them in.

They couldn't leave to go back to the hotel for the much anticipated cupcakes waiting for them there.

Nadia asked the man to move his truck but he said they could wait 5 or 10 minutes; 20 minutes later, the man was in the 7-Eleven finishing up slowly, and Nadi goes in and yells at him to move his truck, using a colorful expletive...I'm not Nadia so I don't think I will say that expletive out loud from the pulpit like she did in the holy space of St. James'.

Someone as real and honest about herself as Nadia can tell a story like that, saying that confrontation is always a choice and not proud of what she did, but real about it...letting the light shine on it...and receiving God's grace around it.

She really embodies her message; and gives us all permission to be real with God, each other, and ourselves, which is freedom.

As you seek to grow with God, ask yourself if the spiritual practices you do, and the way you bring spirituality to all aspects of life, do the practices, does our way of being, make you freer...are you feeling the freedom that God desires for you to have?

God desires it so much that God came to us in Jesus, lived and died, and then lived again, the resurrected life, so that we can be free.

Living into this freedom God wants us to have is a lifelong experience.

Being honest, and real, not judging others, but dealing with, or maybe simply acknowledging, our own issues, this is part of how we experience grace and find the freedom God wants us to have, freedom from our demons, freedom from others' judgments, freedom from pride and despair.

Jesus is serious about people getting real and looking at their own stuff and repenting, but in the story of fig tree that we hear the heart of Jesus' message of grace.

Jesus told them this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.

So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none.

Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?'

He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

People are impatient, we are impatient, with ourselves and others, but God who is the gardener, who planted us, and waters us, puts us in good soil, and provides all the light we need to grow, God says, 'give that fig tree some more time'.

Not to miss the point that we need to be serious about our growth, there is that push at the end, one more year...give that tree one more year before you cut it down.

Again, I think that is the anxiety of the new Christian community, because God does not cut down, God builds up; God is always sending the water and the light to help us along.

I will conclude with a quotation from Nadia Bolz-Weber's book, *Pastrix: The Cranky Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint*:

God's grace is not defined as God being forgiving to us even though we sin. Grace is when God is a source of wholeness, which makes up for my failings.

*My failings hurt me and others and even the planet, and God's grace to me is that my brokenness is not the final word ... it's that God makes beautiful things out of even my own s**t.*

Grace isn't about God creating humans and flawed beings and then acting all hurt when we inevitably fail and then stepping in like the hero to grant us grace - like saying, "Oh, it's OK, I'll be the good guy and forgive you."

It's God saying, "I love the world too much to let your sin define you and be the final word.

I am a God who makes all things new."¹

Amen.

¹Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and a Saint*, New York: Jericho Books, 2013, p. 49 of 206.

When first learning about the Lutheran Church, her pastor announced that she (and others) could sign up for an Inquirer's' class in the Narthex. Nadia leans over to her boyfriend and says, "The Narthex? Isn't that a Dr. Seuss character that speaks for the trees??" (p. 47) This speaks to me of what we in the Church assume people understand about our language and culture. We need people such as Nadia to show the Church what we don't know.