

SERMON
March 11, 2007
“Repentance and mercy”

Last Monday I went into Eugene
and attended my son’s philosophy class at the University of Oregon.

It was an Ethics class, and on this particular day
the professor was talking about Christian ethics,
especially Christian virtues and vices.

The professor was a little Jewish woman
in front of about 200 students in the lecture hall,
and she just stood up there and talked with them without any notes.

She had a student get up
and read the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

Then she said, “Name a Christian virtue found in the Sermon on the Mount.”
Someone said “Mercy”.

She said, “What is mercy?”

Someone said, “Forgiveness.”

She said, “What kind of forgiveness?”

And she worked with them and got them to narrow down the definition of mercy.

“Mercy is not punishing when you have the power to punish.”

Well, in today’s Gospel story someone asks Jesus about punishment.

The news was that Roman soldiers had rushed into a Jewish synagogue
and killed some Jewish men while they were worshipping.

“Was this God’s punishment?” they ask.

Jesus says, “No, but unless you repent you will perish just as they did.

And those 18 men who were killed in that construction accident
when the rock wall fell on them,
do you think God was punishing them?

No, God wasn't punishing them.

But unless you repent, you will perish just as they did."

It seems like people are always concerned
about whether God ought to punish other people.

Is AIDS the way God punishes gays? No!

Was Hurricane Katrina God's punishment for immoral lifestyle of New Orleans?

"No!" Jesus says. God doesn't work that way.

What is interesting is that

as soon as someone asks about God punishing those people for their sins,
Jesus immediately turns it around.

"Don't you worry about their sins," he says.

"Worry about your own sins.

I tell you, unless you repent, you will perish."

When I was a kid, someone pointed out to me

that when I pointed my finger at someone else in accusation,
I had three fingers pointing right back at myself.

"Don't be so obsessed about the sins of others," Jesus says.

"Take stock of your own sins,
and do the work of repentance."

When I was a priest at my first church,

I went to court several times to support a young woman

who was in trouble with the law.

There was always a long wait,
and I got to see the judge at work,

He was about 60 and he impressed me as a kind man,
almost like a father to the people who came before his bench.

The charges were mostly petty crimes –
shoplifting, burglary, possession of drugs.

If it was a first offense, he would be firm but gentle.

“Mr. Smith, do you understand the seriousness of these charges?”
he’d say. “Now, this is your first time in here,
and I going to let you off with a \$100 fine,
but I want you to assure me that this isn’t going to happen again.”

But if it was multiple offenses, he was more stern,
though it was still stern like a father would be.

“Mr. Lindly, this is not the first time you’ve been in this court.
You don’t seem to be able to learn very fast.
I’m going to have to put you in jail for six months.

I hope that you will use that time
to think about how you might change your ways.
Because it’s only going to get worse for you
if you don’t change the way you’re living.”

I saw the judge at a fundraiser once and I said I admired his compassion.

He said, “You know, I’ve been a judge in that court
for almost 20 years now,
and I know these people and the families they come from.

I imagine that if I came from those families

I'd probably be the same way they are, so I always think,
 'There but for the grace of God go I,'
 and I try to be as understanding as I can while I apply the law.

I think God might be like that.

In the Gospel story today, Jesus tells a story about a fig tree growing in a vineyard.
 The owner of the vineyard comes to the gardener
 and tells him to cut down the fig tree
 because it's not bearing any fruit.

The gardener says, "Give it another year.

Let me dig around it first and put some manure into the soil.
 If it still doesn't produce figs after another year,
 then you can cut it down."

People ask Jesus about punishment and retribution,
 and he tells them a story about mercy.

The great writer Leo Tolstoy wrote a story called "Repentance."

This story is about an old man who lived a sinful life.
 But just before he died, he called out to God and said,
 "Lord, forgive me like you forgave the thief on the cross next to Jesus!"

As he said these words, his soul left his body
 and he found himself at the gates of heaven.

He knocked at the gates, and he heard a voice say,
 "Who is it that knocks at the gates of Paradise,
 and what deeds did he do in his life?"

Right there next to the man stood the devil,
 and he listed every sinful thing the man ever did in his life.

The voice inside the gates said,

“Sinners cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.

Go away.”

The man said, “I can hear your voice, but I can’t see your face
and I don’t know your name.”

The voice said, “I am Peter the Apostle.”

So the man said, “Surely you’ll have mercy on me and let me in,
for you remember how you denied the Lord three times
and how you went out and wept bitterly afterwards!
So it is with me.”

But the voice was silent.

So they again began to knock at the gates of heaven.

He heard a second voice behind the gates:

“Who is this man, and how did he live on earth?”

And again the devil recited all the evil things he had done and the voice said,
Sinners cannot dwell with us in Paradise. Go away.”

The man said, “I can hear your voice,
but I can’t see your face
and I don’t know your name.”

The voice said, “I am King David, who sat upon the throne of Israel.”

The man said, "Surely you'll let me in
because you remember how you took the woman Bathsheba for your own
and had a child by her and then had her husband Uriah killed on the battlefield,
and you acknowledged your transgression before the Lord.
So it is with me."

But the voice was silent.

The man kept knocking at the gates of heaven,
until a third voice was heard.
"Who is this man, and how did he live on earth?"

And again the Accuser listed all his sins and again the man was told,
"Sinners cannot dwell with us in Paradise.
Go away."

The man said for the third time,
"I can hear your voice, but I can't see your face
and I don't know your name."

The voice said, "I am John the Divine, the beloved disciple of Christ."

The man said, "Now surely I can come in.
Peter and David must let me in
for they know man's weakness and God's mercy,
and you yourself said, 'God is love',
and 'Whoever loves is born of God and knows God.'
Unless you renounce what you wrote, you have to let me in!"

The gates of heaven swung open and John embraced the repentant sinner
and took him into the kingdom of heaven.

Tolstoy wrote that story when he was an old man,
and he had a better understanding of the limits of human behavior,
and the need we all have for understanding.

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

When we remember our own need for mercy,
we're more likely to understand other people's need for mercy.
And God, in his infinite loving-kindness,
shows us his mercy.