

RELAX, AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 7, 2010

Text: Luke 13:1-9

Have you held a crying baby in the middle of the night, after she's been fed, and she's tired and needs to go back to sleep, but won't? I remember times when one of ours would fuss and fume and wail and kick, wanting something but not able to tell me what it was. Was it a bubble? She'd already burped plenty. She had a dry diaper. Her needs had been taken care of. I wanted so badly to communicate to her that she was all right, that everything would be okay, she could relax and go back to sleep.

For several minutes she would keep it up, fighting against sleep, against me, against the world and everything, and I would not see what the problem was. Finally, she would relent, rest her head on my shoulder. The sobs would turn to sniffles, the breathing would slow. She would catch the rhythm of my own breathing, then it seemed like she would hear my heartbeat as I held her close, firmly but not tight, against my chest, legs tucked up, then the legs would relax, too, and the eyelids would finally close and she would sleep. Sleep peacefully for hours.

I sometimes had the feeling that babies were another species, because communication was so bad. But then, gradually, she seemed to understand that she was in the hands of someone who loved her, the world was a place of peace and beauty, it was good to be alive and even to sleep.

There is a moment in putting a baby to sleep in your arms, when you witness something that might be called . . . repentance. The baby no longer thinks it is up to her to make everything come right. She stops fearing that if she doesn't cry loud enough the world will end. She quits demanding her rights, and surrenders to the realization that her parents can be trusted. There is a turning of some sort. *I think it is analogous to our turning from an absolute dependence on ourselves, towards trusting in God.*

From your perspective as a parent, you are conscious of how utterly dependent that baby is on you not just for her existence, but for her well-being. For analyzing her needs and meeting them. And you know how much you love her. You know to what lengths you will go to show that love. You don't need for her to tell you either how precious she is, or how to love her. *You know.* But try to convince a crying baby of that in the middle of the night!

Or, if you are God, try to convince humanity that you love them, and that you are a God of wisdom and mercy. Try to hold close to you a humanity that is filled with sin and racked with pain, living in the midst of evil. *Try to persuade people that your love is the cause of whatever is good in their lives, not a result of it.* Try to get people to entrust themselves to you. People typically won't have any of it.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tries to move people from one paradigm for looking at their relationship to God, to an utterly different one. In the first framework, people assume they are in charge of their relationship to God. God's love will come to them only if they are good—that is, if they do not sin. It all depends on them. They worry about securing God's love for themselves by being righteous, and they fear losing God's love by being sinners. So naturally, when bad things happen like that massacre or the falling tower, they try to figure out why the bottom line for those people was so bad—and they figure, they must have displeased God. You have to be very careful around God in this paradigm.

Jesus, telling the parable about the tree, wants people to know that the good in their lives is a direct result of his own prior goodness to them, not a reward for their good behavior. The tree will bear fruit *if and only if* God is working in it first. You remember the verse from 1 John, "We love *because he loved us first.*" People had forgotten that. And they had consequently gotten into an adversarial relationship with God—quite the opposite of the relationship God wants to have with people.

People argue with God in a pointless effort to make sure we are being taken care of just right. We don't know what's really wrong with us any more than a crying baby knows why it cries. We act like we are the captains of our souls and masters of our destiny, when in fact we are in the arms of the Father who made us and loves us.

All our fussing about how to avoid angering God can lead to a lot of mean-spirited comparisons, among other things. Jesus: "Do you think they were worse sinners than all the other Galileans? I tell you, no." It leads to other things as well, like the priest on the road to Jericho trying to keep ritually clean so he ignored the victim of crime. It also leads to people giving up on righteousness and just using life to have a "good time." Sin has its roots in selfish peace-making: people designing the sort of peace they prefer, just for themselves or the few people they care about, usually at the expense of other people's peace.

To live thinking like that is to be in a constant state of mutiny against God, whose love for us predates our existence. God wants us, instead of living in constant negotiations with him for his favor, to rest our head on his shoulder, relax, and—you could say—go to sleep. Sleep is a good metaphor for trust, and I mean it just as a metaphor—not as a way of life. The psalmist says "My spirit is content, as with the richest of foods, and my mouth praises you with | joyful lips, when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the night watches."

When we awake, we need to continue to trust, fearlessly, in the promises God makes to us, and bear the fruit he calls us to bear without acting all colicky if things don't go our way. God has proven and expressed clearly his passion for our life and health and well-being, both personal and social. That love, not our kicking and screaming, is what will make everything all right. That incalculable love of God, not our great negotiating skills, will save the world.

A counselor told me when I was 33 years old that he suspected I was still living to make my mother happy, although she had died almost 20 years before. Silly me. As if I needed to do anything to make her love me. She loved me before I could walk or talk—she didn't need for me to become a minister or earn a Ph.D.

God doesn't need those things, either, to make him love me. I know that. But I still need reminding, because I know I still find myself rationalizing my way through life, measuring out my love for others, protecting my own esteem and future, pounding my tiny little hands against the chest of God, when . . . all God wants is for me to feel and think and believe the way the psalmist did: "For you have been my helper, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice."

Our gathering today, and every Sunday, is that kind of praise of God. We come, we relent from the machinations and quibbles by which we seek to make bad lives right, and we accept from God the gift of righteousness through his Son as if it were food, as if God's love could take the place of food, because our flesh faints for God, who calls the world to rightness and peace, saying: "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the "waters"; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. . . . Incline your ear, and come to me; *listen, so that you may live.*"

Oh, no. We think we know better. We think we have to make it all work out for ourselves.

Yeah, sure. As if baby knows best. Amen.

