

Rev. Dr. David Holyan
“One More Chance”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, March 24, 2019

Isaiah 55:1-9

*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.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labour for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.*

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

Luke 13:1-9

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘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.’

Then he told 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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down."

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You and to the power of Your Spirit. I pray that Your Spirit would take these words we have heard read from Scripture, the words that we lift to you in song and in prayer, the words of whatever joy or concern is within us and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these words into Your Word, the Word of Christ, and let that Word, Christ's Word, live within us, minister to us, challenge us, comfort us, heal us all for Your glory. I ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Not long after I came to faith and was baptized as a Roman Catholic, I had a dream that was really powerful to me, and it's something that in a peculiar way that I realize now as I look back over the years, is something that has stuck with me for some time. The prayer was an image of myself in this wooden structure that had a really unique smell. It had a wooden floor and it had logs along the wall with little cracks in them between the logs where the light would come in, and it had the aroma if you will, or the feel of a sacred place. I understood it to be a Tibetan temple kind of a place somewhere far away, possibly in Nepal. In the dream, I went from room to room. One I was studying in. One I was resting in. One I was eating in. And another, I was there conversing with people who were very different than me. In that entire dream, no matter where I was, in that room or in those rooms, I felt a sense of deep comfort and peace, but I knew that it was different. It was something other than the normal experience. And as I had that dream and reflected on it later, I realized that we Christians are not the only ones who hold prayer and God and service in a special place in our hearts and in our lives. In fact, so powerful was this dream that I have, to this day, a strand within me that appreciates Tibetan prayer and the hard life of the Tibetan people, much simpler than ours, seems to be filled with more joy than ours, a life where they pull together to make things happen in their community.

A couple of years ago, Jani and I, trying to figure out what we were going to do out in our backyard-- had built kind of a pergola structure. And one of the suggestions that she had was, "Let's get Tibetan prayer bells, different sizes, and string them up so that when the wind blows, they'll make different sounds." I've always been partial to the Tibetan's prayer flags, the strand that you tie in two corners or across any span that has multicolored little flags. Each one has something written on it. I've been powerfully touched by the prayer wheels that spin as you put prayers inside of it or you light incense and you can spin a wheel and offer your prayer to God. And at home in my study, I have a chair. I call it my prayer chair. I don't do any work in that chair. It's just there to be quiet and to breathe. And right on my left side is a little bookshelf that has the height of the chair. And on that bookshelf, there's a prayer bracelet that I picked up a while ago. It's a Tibetan prayer bracelet, and it has eye of tiger stones on it, and they're all linked around. And to me, it's almost like a Tibetan rosary. It's something that you can say a prayer with on one of the stones and then move it to the other and just kind of work your way through. And I don't know why this week of all weeks as I was sitting in the early morning hours and I reached over and grabbed that, it spoke to me in a profound way. And so I came to the preparation for the sermon this week thinking about these little stones that can remind us of God's presence, that can remind us of the things that we need to pay attention to, and can invite us to look beyond ourselves and our limits to see the world and to see our neighbors, possibly in a new light.

So thinking about that, I came to the text for this week. And as I read through the two that I had chosen probably six months ago, and then the two that I had left out, I realized that in each passage, the four passages from Luke, Isaiah, 1 Corinthians and the Psalm, there's a little nugget, a stone if you will, a prayer that I think each of us could just hang onto and maybe roll around in our minds' imagination, each being an invitation for us in this season of Lent. The first one, and the most obvious one in the season of Lent where we examine ourselves and our failings, our shortcomings comes from Luke, again in the 13th chapter. Its verses three and verse five. They're the same, essentially. It says, "No. I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." The quintessential Lenten message. Repent and live. Don't repent and die. Now, you got to remember Jesus is an impassioned rabbi. He's teaching aggressively and trying to get His followers to start embodying grace and mercy and forgiveness, so He's laying it on thick. But he says very clearly, "Unless you repent, you will all perish," and He gives examples of what perishing look like for two different situations. We are invited to imagine ourselves changing how we live and how we act in order to become more and more like Christ each day of our lives. That is the essence of repentance, to take the faith that we have and to put it into action. Whether it's hosting a student group as we did over the weekend, or it's giving blood at the upcoming blood drive, or it's participating in the

Building Together Forever capital campaign, each of us are invited to put our faith into action again and again and again. And it wasn't until this morning that I realized there's this strange connection between a dream I had almost 25 years ago and our current situation with the capital campaign. Because in the dream, I remember sitting and looking at these little tiny poles that were horizontal and watching light come in. And as I've said before, there's a place just outside the balcony door up there where you can sit with your back against the interior wall and look at light coming through the brick because there's no [inaudible]. Now, that's not exactly a clear connection but I'm just saying these things are relevant and full of meaning. And sometimes you're surprised at how they come together. Repent. Unless you repent, you will perish. One stone. The second stone is from Isaiah. "Seek the Lord while he may be found. Call upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their way and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them. And to our God, for he will abundantly pardon." Again, this begins to sound harsh. But as you unpack it, you realize that the Prophet is saying, "Let the wicked forsake their way or repent from their way. Let the unrighteous repent from their thoughts. And let them return to the Lord so that they will find mercy and be pardoned abundantly." Again, that whole turning of repentance, where we recognize that we may have caused harm, we change our behavior, we embody grace and peace, and we return back to something better. Another stone to turn in our hands. Examining those places where we have been wicked to another, where we have had unrighteous thoughts. And realizing that that's what it means to be human. And it's okay, as long as we return to the Lord, in order to have mercy and pardon fill us. The third stone, and to me, the one that's most powerful is from First Corinthians. Again, a reading that I chose to leave out. "God is faithful. God will not let you be tested beyond your strength. But with the testing, God will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it."

Each of us, in this life, find ourselves being tested. Sometimes, that test is beyond our strength. Just in this past week, I've talked to people who've been hospitalized and diagnosed with cancer and all sorts of other ailments. Someone who put their husband in hospice care. All in a sense, a test that is beyond their strength to understand stand to make sense out of it to see how God is at work in it. And yet the promise that comes is that God will provide us a way out of this. That there's hope on the other side of whatever testing we experience. And this, to me, is a powerful stone that we can hang on to especially in the middle of that test. "Okay, Lord. Provide the way out. Be with me so that I may endure." The mantra can go on. As I mentioned, the Gospel of Luke has the repent or else kind of stone but I want to bring all of them together and just talk briefly about the fig tree. A part of this story that is often overlooked is at the very beginning a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. So this person had a whole vineyard that was fruitful and he's making wine and everybody's was happy and all of a sudden he decides, "Hey, let's try a fig tree too." And then the tree doesn't grow and it doesn't grow and it doesn't grow and finally, he said, "Okay. That was a mistake. Let's get rid of it." And the gardener says, "Wait a minute. Let me dig around it. Let me put manure on it. Let's just see what happens. Give it one more year and maybe, maybe the tree will produce its fruit. And if not, then we can cut it down." It seems obvious to most commentators that somehow we are the tree, the fig tree that has been brought in to the vineyard. We are the ones who are welcomed into God's kingdom. We are the ones who are provided all the richness of that kingdom. All the soil and nutrients that we need in order to grow and to produce fruit in order to feed others. And sometimes we don't quite live up to what God's desires for us are. And to me, that's where Christ, the gardener, steps in and says, "Wait a minute. Let me get my hands dirty. Let me dig around. Let me put manure on it. Just let me do what I need to do in order to nurture and support this tree and let's see if it can be fruitful."

And my hope is that for all of us, we allow Christ to do that work in our hearts. And that we realize that Christ is not afraid to get dirty or to have manure on his hands even when it's ours. He will work with us in order to help us be fruitful. Another stone. And the final stone comes from the Psalm that we just sang together, "My soul clings to you. Your right hand upholds me. That no matter where we are in this journey of land, no matter what dirt we're looking at, no matter what manure we're worried about, that we can affirm that our soul clings to God and that God's right hand upholds us." I don't know when you say your prayers but when you do, I hope that one of these little stones might give you life. Amen.