

Third Sunday In Lent – Elizabeth Ahern

Isaiah 55:1-9, Psalm 63:1-8, 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, Luke 13:1-9

If you have studied the religions of the world, you may know that in one Eastern religion the Goddess of Compassion (Guan Yin) is depicted in art as a woman holding in one hand a vase of pure water. The name Guan Yin has been interpreted to mean, “She who hears the cries of the suffering in the world.” Water, to our knowledge, is very useful. We use it to quench our thirst and to wash clean anything from ourselves to dirty dishes. (I use it a lot for that.) We know that water is important, as we will certainly die without it, but we do not worry about it too much because we have plenty of it to go around here in the Midwest—specially right now, when we hear about the Mississippi River flooding. What if we lived in a dry and weary land where there is no water like the psalmist describes?

In our Christian religion, we picture God as a God of grace and compassion, and He (or She if you prefer) is. But we often live our lives as if though God does not ask us to do anything, and if He does asks us we can be excused, depending on our circumstances.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read about a conversation with Jesus. Those present seemed to inquire about the stories or news of the times. Under Roman occupation the poor people of Israel were subjected to all kinds of humiliation, disrespect and suffering. In this case, imagine the horror when the Galileans went to worship at the Temple (similar to what we are doing here) in Jerusalem, and prepared animals for a sacrifice, only to end up murdered by Pilate—and their own blood (maybe their own flesh and bones also) mixed in with the sacrifice (offering). Then came the example of the 18 that died, squashed by a tower that fell on them. It seems that the crowd is trying to make sense of these tragic events, and may even wonder if those who died deserved what had happened to them because of their sins. (Remember that Old Testament folk believed that if something bad happened to you, it was because of your sins.) Jesus is clear: no, it was not that those who died in these tragic events were worse sinners. Then He tells them that regardless of what happened to these Galileans, unless they turn to God and repent, they would die too.

Jesus does not stop there; he takes it a notch higher and tells them a story about the man that had a fig tree in his yard which after three years did not produce fruit. The man asked the gardener to cut it down so that it would not waste any of the soil. The gardener pleads to allow more time to cultivate it and see if that would work. If they had Googled it, they would have seen that it could take up to five years for a fig tree to produce fruit, but three years is the standard. My parents were great horticulturalists and had many fruit trees in our yard in Texas: orange, peach, guava and fig. The fig tree was located in the front corner of the yard and though I enjoyed the figs, I never asked them how long it had taken for it to produce fruit. We can all understand that desire for productivity and efficiency, especially if resources like land and water are scarce, but this is Jesus telling this story. Clearly, not the archetypal meek Jesus!

Have you ever placed conditions on God? I have. One of those conditions has been about the type of sermons I like to preach. I had recently told God that I did not want to preach a very preachy and condemning sermon; that I would rather preach about uplifting and healing messages—full of compassion. You can imagine how I felt when I first read the scriptures for today. However, I also felt the Holy Spirit telling me, ‘Hang in there Elizabeth, wait and see what I mean and what I can do. Your thoughts are not My thoughts, right?’

As we are studying in Sunday school, Lisa Sharon Harper reminds us in The Very Good Gospel that sin is separation. We know that living in sin separates us from God, but she also tells us that to the Hebrew sin meant broken relationships with people as well. She also says that when we hurt one another, we hurt the image of God because every person was created in His image. Once, Jesus spoke about gratitude and how out of ten that were healed only one came back to say thanks. Yet, in my experience, it is much easier for us fragile human beings to say ‘Thank you’ than to say that one is sorry for actions committed against another. Our modern living excuses us from true repentance, and we are polite and we say our ‘Please and thank you’ in our culture.

In addition, women use the word ‘Sorry’ too much (sorry, ladies). Women that have broken the glass ceiling in the corporate world often advise other women not to say ‘Sorry’ all the time, because it makes us look hesitant in our actions—a sign of lack of confidence. I don’t know why women say ‘Sorry’ so much, but one reason may be to appear nice, polite and non-threatening, especially to males that have dominated the professional working world. But saying ‘Sorry’ all the time when there is no real need to apologize devalues the real intent of the expression, ‘I am sorry’ (‘I apologize for what I have done to hurt you’ or ‘I repent and I regret doing what I did’ or ‘I am sorry for what my ancestors did to yours’). When there are real reasons to apologize and express remorse for the separation that has taken place, people just rarely do it.

It is easier probably to fill our lives with stuff—more things and more people that keep us busy and distracted, but only make us remain empty. No wonder Isaiah 55:2 asks: *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.*

When Eric and I were missionaries in Mexico, our late and beloved superintendent for the Mexico City missionary district, Jorge Guarello, told me that prior to coming to Christ he had everything, but felt empty. He said that though close family and friends surrounded him, he still felt lonely. When we met Jorge, he was an impressive apostle-type of leader: a smart intellectual, charismatic, with a strong sense of humor and very nurturing and caring as well. Not to mention that he knew the best places to find the best local food.

The reality is that we all suffer—sometimes because of our own actions, and sometimes because of the actions of others. Suffering entered the world a long time ago. The fragile human being suffers for all kinds of reasons. When it comes to repentance, no one is

excused though. Not even those suffering utter human degradation, nor the ones who are innocent bystanders that just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time when natural disaster strikes.

In this Season of Lent, when we prepare for the Easter celebration, it is good to be reminded that God's invitation is open to everyone, regardless of economic status, gender or ethnicity. Isaiah 55:1 says, *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.*

While God does ask us to repent and produce fruit, He promises that reconciliation, healing and flourishing comes after repentance. Even in a dry and weary land—spiritually speaking.

Like fresh, pure and thirst-quenching water is the satisfaction and healing that pours over a repentant soul. Be cleansed, washed clean, drink and be refreshed. Amen!