

“JESUS, NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES:  
III – OUR CHALLENGER”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
March 24, 2019

Third Sunday of Lent

I Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

Over the past month or so, I have spent four days at Camp Pecometh interviewing candidates for ordained ministry. I'm a member of the Board of Ordained Ministry and our job is to screen and test candidates for ministry in local churches and other settings. Each candidate has to meet certain qualifications – educational, experiential, psychological – and so on. Then they have to prepare a paper for us, which includes a sermon, a Bible study, and answers to several theological questions. It ends up being around 50 pages or so. (By the way, this year we had thirteen candidates – which winds up being a ton of reading for us!)

At any rate, after they've done all those things, finally, they come and appear before us – the Board of Ordained Ministry – for a day of questioning and discussion. On that day, in the morning, they appear before four different subcommittees – each with a different focus. One is Bible and Theology, another Human Relations and Pastoral Care, the third is Worship, Sacraments and Preaching, and the fourth, the one I chair is Christian Education, Church Administration and Evangelism. So throughout the morning, they go from one to another, answering questions in those specific areas. In the afternoon, they meet with the entire board, and then we make a decision, whether they should move forward in the process and be held back another year.

It is, as you can imagine, a tense day for them. The questions aren't easy. One that is particularly challenging comes from the Bible and Theology committee and it goes like this: Tell us why there are four different Gospels, what makes each of them unique, and then tell us what those unique things are.

Well, there are a number of things they could say, like who the authors are thought to be, the audiences to which they were written, the central message they're trying to portray. For instance, they could tell us that Matthew was written for the Jews, and its purpose is to show, at every turn, that Jesus is the Messiah whose birth was foretold in the pages of the Hebrew scriptures. Therefore, Matthew starts his Gospel, not with the birth of Jesus, but with the genealogy from the Hebrew scriptures leading up to Jesus. And Matthew is filled with references to the Hebrew scriptures to show how Jesus fulfills them all.

So these candidates have to tell us a little bit about each Gospel for this particular question in the Board interview. Well, I have to tell you that I discovered something as I prepared this sermon this week that I confess I never really noticed, nor has any candidate ever mentioned – about the Gospel of Luke, from which this morning’s lesson comes. Luke, more than any of the other three Gospels, is big on repentance.

Now, I said I never really noticed that, but I guess what I should have said was, I never really identified it that way. But after one commentary opened my eyes, I thought “well sure, absolutely.” I mean, think about it. Luke is the Gospel filled with the wonderful stories of the lost being found – of lives completely turning around – well, of repentance.

You know the stories – they’re among some of the best loved in the Bible. The story of the Prodigal Son – who after squandering all the gifts of his loving Father and ending up in squalor – repented and went back to restore his relationship, only to be met by his loving and forgiving Father on the way. Or how about Zaccheus, that cheating tax collector? At the invitation of Jesus, he came down out of a tree to repent, to so totally change his ways that he became a loving and giving member of society.

Luke is filled with stories of repentance – and so it is that we come upon one today – at least a story of an invitation to repentance. It starts out in a rather odd, but very truthful way. Jesus is talking about what has happened to some very unfortunate people – Galileans who were killed at the hands of Pilate, and others who died when the Tower of Siloam fell upon them. He knows that his audience is sad about their demise, but more than that, they have an underlying question – which is why? Why did those people die? Was it because they were sinners?

Age-old questions, the “why do bad things happen to good people” questions. Jesus knew that his audience was wondering if their sin had brought the calamity upon them. He quickly denied that, but then, notice what he did – he turned the conversation to them, the audience, and gave them a warning. “Unless you repent, you’re in peril.” In other words, quit worrying about everybody else, worry about yourself and your own sin. He challenged them – and yes, he challenges us – to look inward, and repent – before it’s too late.

It’s a call to ask ourselves questions like:

“What things do I do that are not pleasing to God? What do I do that pulls me away from God rather than draws me close? What do I do that I don’t want God to know about? What secrets am I hiding? What sins am I committing that I’m afraid to name? Am I living solely for myself and not for others? Am I living the

life God created me to live?” And perhaps, most pointedly of all, “Am I living the abundant life Christ died to give me or am I squandering it away?”

All tough questions, all questions that call us to really take a honest inventory of who we are and how we’re living – questions that we’d rather not ponder all that much, truth be told. Jesus knew that then, and knows it now. Yet, he says, “the time is now to repent, for someday it will be too late.”

And yet, too often, like people throughout the ages, we don’t repent. We don’t take the time and do the inventory, we don’t take an honest look at our lives. Why? Well, maybe, because we’re afraid of what we’ll find. We know who we are, and what we do, and we don’t want to admit it. Or we don’t want to give up some of those things – even though they’re wrong. Or, worst of all, maybe we don’t repent, because we think we’re too bad to be forgiven, we are who we are, and if God knew who we really were, he couldn’t forgive us.

You know, I’ll never forget reading a little story about a man driving home one day, feeling really low, really bad about himself. He didn’t like who had become, and he did, in fact, doubt that God could love him, or make him more than he was at that point in his life. And then, he happened to drive by a big collection lot in his city, a place where stuff was dropped – like scrap iron, old bottles and cans, wrecked cars, broken machines – and so on. He had to stop for a red light, and while he sat there, he watched some of this “junk” being loaded onto a railroad car, on which it would be taken to a factory to be reclaimed, to be melted down and remade into something new. He realized it could come out as a surgeon’s tools or fenders on a new car, or maybe even a steeple for a church. And, at that moment, he thought to himself, “If we can do that with our old stuff, how much more can God do with us human beings!” It gave him the courage to give himself to Jesus, all that he was, all the bad, all the good, all of him – knowing that, as he repented and turned everything to God, God could do something good. (James W. Moore, *Yes, Lord, I Have Sinned, But I Have Several Excellent Excuses*, “Sin . . . and Redemption,” p. 100.

That man was right, it is not too late to repent, to turn around and let God be God with your life. And what you will discover, is what anyone who has had the courage to repent and go a new way has discovered throughout the ages – and that is joy! The joy of a life in Christ! The joy of living the life God created you to live.

Look at what happened to the prodigal son. When he came home to his father, he knew a life of joy, forgiveness, love and purpose, a life embraced by love and a life sharing love. For Zaccheus, it meant taking the focus off of himself, and learning how much more blessed it was to give than to receive. All that time, he’d spent storing up stuff for himself by cheating others, now he knew the joy of giving from what he had that others might have joy too.

That's what repenting can do. When we turn from our selfish, sinful ways we discover joy and giving and abundance, such as we'll never know when we only think of ourselves. Jesus wants us to know that joy, but we can't, if we don't repent and turn back toward him. And you heard his words – he urgently wants us to do that. He pushes us – the time is now, don't wait until it's too late.

And then, he adds a twist, a very loving little twist at the end of the passage. Did you hear it? The parable of the fig tree, and the patient gardener. That little fig tree was there for year after year, bearing no fruit. Any good gardener might have taken it down, for its lack of production. But not the patient, loving gardener. No, he pleads for one more year, one more change. "Give it a little more time to produce, before you cut it down. Let me do a little to help it. I'll dig a little around it, and spread some fertilizer around to help it."

Oh, if that's not the picture of our God. Patient, loving, encouraging, doing whatever he can to encourage us to bear fruit. God no more wants to strike us down than did that gardener want to cut down that fig tree, and so, he encourages us over and over to grow, to repent, to change our ways – and he is right there to help in any way he can. He does not want us to perish!

Can you hear him calling to you today? He's calling your name, my name, telling us that now is the time to repent, to change our ways, to take up our cross and follow him, fully and faithfully. Are you ready to do that? Are you willing to do that? Do you trust that he loves you enough that you can do that? Do you trust that he can take you, just as you are, and make you all that you can be?

I hope we all do. I hope we will all embrace Jesus' challenge today to turn away from the things we ought not be doing, to confess them and give them over to him, to walk in the newness of life he offers. I think he would say to us just now, what we hear him saying so often in scripture, "Do not be afraid. I am with you."

So let us not be afraid, to answer Jesus' challenge today. May we have the courage to confess our sins, to ask for his forgiveness, and to let him lead us into that life of joy and meaning he died to give us.

Jesus says, "the time is now." And so may it be. Let us spend a few moments in silent prayer right now, thinking on who we are and how we live, and if there are things we need to give over to him right now, that we might know the joy of new life. I invite you, as you pray, to have a picture in your mind. Perhaps it will be like that father in the parable of the Prodigal Son- God running toward you with his arms wide open waiting to embrace you, forgive you and set you on a new road of joy and abundance. Or maybe picture Jesus standing under that tree calling down Zaccheus – maybe today it will be Jesus calling to you, to come and be with him, to

lay down your burden of sin, and walk into a life of joy and giving. Or maybe, for you, the picture can be of a gardener, standing near you, holding off those who would cut you down, pleading your case – saying “I love you, you’re worth saving.”

May one of those pictures bring you comfort, but more than that, empower you to right now, repent and turn around, and walk into the joy of a new future God has planned for you.

So let us pray in silence, and answer Christ’s call to repentance. If you’d like to come, the rail is open for prayer. After we have prayed in silence, we’ll continue to pray as we sing “Just as I Am” and I will invite you to remain seated for that, as well.

So now, let us pray and answer Christ’s call to repentance.