

Date: March 14, 2004

SUNDAY: Lent 3

SERMON: A Salutory Judgment

Text(s): Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13;

Luke 13:1-9

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When I was growing up in rural western Pennsylvania, the kids in our neighborhood spent a lot of our free time playing baseball and football in the former cow pasture next to our house.

One afternoon in September some guys from a neighborhood a mile or two away from ours came over after school to test their prowess against us.

We knew we needed to watch out for one guy in particular from that bunch. His name was Mike, and he was two years older than most of us; he was big and tough, and we knew it. So we planned to do what any normal team of guys would—we decided to double-team him and run the ball the other way toward his younger brother Dave who was about the same size as us and a quiet geeky-looking kid. You know the kind I'm talking about—kind of skinny and wiry, straight A's, high honor student in school, wore glasses—didn't look anything like your typical football jock. Looked more like, well, like a petroleum engineer which is what he later became. Well, on the first play, I got the honor of running the ball. My neighbor Arwood who was the quarterback handed off to me and I went on an end-around sweep to the left toward Dave, this quiet kid who wore glasses and just kind of hung back from the line of scrimmage waiting for me. I was sure I could make yardage against him, so I tucked the ball in tight and ran right at him. I tell you, I've never been hit so hard by anything or anyone in all my life. My teeth rattled. I thought my eyes were going to pop out of their sockets!

That was a salutory experience. Salutory comes from the Latin word for salvation. A salutory experience is one that may be unpleasant or even painful at the time, but that turns out to

have a beneficial or redemptive result. Getting clobbered by Dave Dibley was salutory in two ways: one was that I learned that if I was going to survive that football game (notice how any thought of winning it was no longer even in my mind.)—if I was going to survive, I was going to have to stay away from Dave Dibley. I mean, how was I to know that three years later, the guy would be an All-American linebacker for the University of Pittsburgh!

It was also salutory because it taught me that I really didn't enjoy pain all that much, and that there were probably other things that I was better suited for than a career in football.

Usually we're better at seeing other people's experiences as salutory than we are our own. Somehow, it's always easier to see the speck of dust in someone else's eye than it is to see the log in our own. We have a great capacity for self-deception. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches ethics at Duke University, in a book called *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, makes the point that often "the condition of self-deception becomes the rule rather than the exception in our lives." We deceive ourselves about our motives, about our ethics, about our judgments, our priorities and goals in life; the list is long, isn't it?

Warnings against self-deception are sounded in all of our lessons this morning. Isaiah chides the people because God has set out a feast for them that is free for the eating, and yet they are ignoring what is in front of their eyes and pursuing illusory fantasies instead. "*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?*" he asks them, "*or your labor for that which does not satisfy?*" Sounds like he could be talking to us, doesn't it, with our pursuit of trinkets and toys that our consumerist culture makes us believe we can't live without. We probably ought to commit that question of Isaiah to memory and repeat it every time a TV commercial tells us we can't live a fulfilling life without driving a certain kind of car or owning the latest wireless picture phone.

St. Paul warns the Christians in Corinth

about the consequences of some bad theology that is feeding right into that capacity for self-deception and producing self-indulgent moral and ethical behavior that was in danger of destroying their life in community. Some of them were claiming that they were already “raised with Christ” and therefore, as resurrected beings, they were now free from any moral or ethical norms that apply to mere mortals.

Paul counters their self-indulgent, self-deceiving behavior by citing the history of God’s dealings with his people Israel in the past. When Israel failed to do the things that pleased God and fell into sinful ways, self-justifying behavior, inevitably, those wrong ways of living brought on their own consequences. While these consequences had real and immediate causes, looking back at them in hindsight, Paul says, one can interpret them as God’s salutary judgments, because they had produced the end result of moving the people to repentance and saving them from their own folly.

Israel’s experience of God’s saving judgments, Paul says, is salutary one for us as well. It contains warnings for us to “*avoid desiring evil as they did. . . Therefore,*” says the apostle, “*if anyone thinks that he stands, take heed lest he fall.*” In other words, don’t presume upon God’s grace. Don’t deceive yourselves into thinking that because God’s grace is free, it is also cheap. It is most wonderfully free, but it is most certainly not cheap. God gives his grace freely, not so that we can then live self-centered, self-indulgent lives, but that so that we may grow more and more into the image of Christ.

Jesus beats that same drum in our gospel lesson. Some people had come to him to ask questions about a massacre that Pontius Pilate the Roman procurator had recently ordered in Galilee. The implication in their question was that these Galileans must have done something pretty bad, because their executions demonstrated God’s unhappiness with them. Of course, the further implication is that since Jesus’ questioners

were not among the massacred, that must mean that they were morally superior to those who were killed, and thus enjoyed God’s favor and approval.

Jesus immediately demolishes the self-justifying, self-deceiving impulse behind their question. “*Do you really think that those Galileans whom Pilate slaughtered were more wicked than everyone else? Or do you really think that the people who were killed when the building collapsed over in Jerusalem were worse sinners than everyone else? I tell you, unless every one of you repents, you shall all likewise perish.*” Now there’s a cheery thought! Getting hit with that blunt statement is not unlike getting hit by Dave Dibley, All-American linebacker. It’s a rude and jolting awakening.

Yet, it’s also a salutary truth. To learn that we are sinners in need of transformation is not a depressing, but a liberating truth. To learn that we had better not presume upon God’s mercy, but rather actively trust ourselves to it, is not bad news, but good news. That’s why Thomas Merton calls the doctrine that we are all sinners an optimistic doctrine. It’s optimistic because it proclaims to us that we can become better than we are. We are not perfect, but we are *perfectible*; the possibility that we can change and be transformed is always open to us. We are not stuck with what we are now. We are not bound irrevocably to our past failures and mistakes.

C. S. Lewis, in *Mere Christianity*, says “*Christianity tells people to repent and promises them forgiveness. It therefore has nothing to say to people who don’t think they’ve done anything to repent of and who don’t feel that they need any forgiveness. It’s after you’ve realized that there is a real Moral Law and a Power behind the law, and that you’ve broken that law and put yourself in the wrong with that Power—it’s after all that that Christianity begins to speak. When you know you’re sick, you’ll listen to the doctor. When you have realized that our position is*

nearly desperate, you'll begin to understand what the Christians are talking about.

Paul's stern warning, "*When you stand, beware, lest you fall,*" and Jesus' blunt "*I tell you that unless you repent you shall all likewise perish,*" are salutary judgments. They are not pleasant to hear, they tell us uncomfortable truths about ourselves, but they also hold open for us the possibility that we may become better than we are.

One of the saddest things about the whole Martha Stewart affair is not that she did something wrong and then lied to cover it up. Which of us hasn't done the same? And what she has lost has so far exceeded anything she might have gained, that it hardly bears talking about. No the saddest thing, is that it has become clear that if at the very beginning of the investigation, she had simply come clean about it, it is very likely that no criminal indictments would ever have been filed against her. The crime wasn't in what she did, not even in her original lie, but in the cover-up. Even now, there is no indication that she has the capacity or willingness to say, "I lied, and I'm sorry for the hurt I've done to others and to myself." We are not in nearly as great a danger from the sins we commit and feel guilty about and confess, as we are from those we commit believing that either they don't matter or that they are not sins at all.

M. Scott Peck, the well-known psychiatrist, says in his best-selling book *People of the Lie* that it is necessary to make a distinction between evil and ordinary sin. It is not simply that evil people are people who commit sinful acts; all of us do that. We are all sinners, inevitably so. But we are not necessarily all evil persons. What distinguishes evil persons from ordinary sinners, says Scott Peck, is their absolute refusal to tolerate the sense of their own sinfulness. They consistently hide their evil deeds even from themselves, persistently justifying their wrong actions. That's why he categorizes evil as a pathology— a sickness. It is a deformation of

our shared humanity.

The capacity to feel remorse when we do wrong is a wonderful thing when that remorse or feeling of guilt leads us to repentance or a change of direction and behavior. I want to be very clear that I'm not saying that all guilt is good guilt. Lord knows, there is more than enough of the neurotic variety of guilt around. Neurotic guilt is guilt that we feel even when we haven't done anything wrong. It's the product of bad conditioning or low self-esteem, which has many causes— manipulation by other people, bad parenting, bad teaching in Sunday School or from the pulpit— we know the mechanisms that produce such neurotic feelings of guilt all too well. If the comedians are to be believed, our mothers are to blame for much of our neurotic guilt. And historically, the Church has often been one of the worst offenders, using guilt as a mechanism of control. But real guilt, the guilt we feel when we have done wrong or hurt someone, is very healthy— is salutary— if it leads us to confession and setting things right with the one we've wronged. When we've wronged someone and have apologized and have been forgiven, it sets us free and opens up the possibility of a new future, and deepened relationships.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus follows up his blunt warning by telling a parable of a fig tree that invites us to open ourselves to that promise of redemption. The fig tree has been unfruitful. It has not fulfilled the promise of its existence. The fig tree is like us in that regard. It's of no use to the owner, and no one would blame him for cutting it down. Yet for no other reason than the sheer goodness of his heart, he defers the day of final judgment. He gives it another year so that the gardener can cultivate it and aerate its roots and feed it some fertilizer. Maybe it will yet bear fruit. There's always hope. The story is open-ended. We never learn whether the fig tree became fruitful or not. We're left to supply our own ending. That's the way with God's mercy. God's judgments are salutary, and the

consequences of ignoring them are real; but so is God's willingness and power to forgive us and give us yet another chance to make a fresh start.

Whether our sins are great or small, so long as we do not deceive ourselves by denying them, God's mercy is held out to us, and God's power to transform our lives is available for the taking. *"Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. You that have no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."* The feast is there for the eating, if we can confess that we are famished—famished for love, for integrity, for wholeness, for purity of heart. To come clean about our own deep thirst will demand openness, humility, honesty, and swallowing of a great deal of pride. But then, no one ever dies from swallowing their pride, do they? The hope of the fig tree is our hope as well. We are offered the possibility of writing a new ending of the story ourselves. And that is, perhaps, the ultimate judgment and the ultimate mercy.