

**“Strategies of Repentance”**  
**Isaiah 55:1–9; 1 Corinthians 10:1–13; Luke 13:1–9**  
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In my previous setting, I accumulated a number of interesting items behind the pulpit. I’m not sure how it started, and it wouldn’t work here because our historic pulpit is too small, though I must say that every time the Tar Heels have beaten my beloved Wildcats, someone, usually someone named Bob Kimball, has left something pale blue on the pulpit, a sweatshirt or hat or something...

But at Knollwood in Winston-Salem, various items were left, all with a story behind them, including a plastic duck, a plastic pink flamingo, Star Trek characters, a battery-operated fan, and a stuffed lion. It looked odd to guest preachers, and when children saw the toys, they said, “So that’s what Dr. Chapman does during worship!” But I kept the items so the preacher would never take him/herself too seriously.

One item was a dispenser of Wash Away Your Sins hand cleanser. It claimed to reduce sin by 98.9% or more; to have a tempting, do it again, Easter lily scent; and to have been tested and approved for all seven deadly sins. The directions read as follows. “1. Bow head. 2. Engage water supply. 3. Pump a generous amount of hand cleanser into palm. 4. Rub hands together religiously. 5. Rinse. 6. Repent.” The label indicated that tougher sins might require additional application, and for the record, I have run out of the cleanser...

Sin is not a joking matter, and repentance is a serious venture, but these are not exactly the most popular topics to consider these days. It takes something extraordinary to get our attention, not just because we don’t want to consider our brokenness and need, but because repentance itself has been reduced to such a narrow focus.

Far too often people think of it as a pointed, negative process of condemning people, a real-life embodiment of the cartoon “Hellfire and Dalmatians” wherein a preaching Dalmatian barks to the canine congregation, “And he said unto them, ‘No, no! Bad dog!’”

Repentance is an arduous task, but it is a broader concern than this, on an individual level and a communal one. It is an ennobling and life-giving venture because it involves not just turning away from something limiting or destructive but toward something better. We need something to get our attention so that we can experience the kind of change and growth repentance involves.

Today's biblical texts offer the possibility of help as the theme of repentance runs through all of them. There are different perspectives on what might best provoke repentance, perhaps all having value, as different strategies work better with different people at different times, but some strategies are more effective than others.

One strategy found in these texts is the threat of punishment. Writing to the church in Corinth, a church with plenty of faults to address, the Apostle Paul warns the people not to practice idolatry, putting anything before God, or indulge in sexual immorality, because when the Israelites did these things, God zapped them — on one occasion killing 23,000 in a single day, on another sending serpents to destroy them. “Fail to repent, and God will get you!” is the message.

I think of Garrison Keillor's reflection on a childhood Sunday School experience wherein he was taught by Mrs. Tollerud that in biblical days, “people who innovated tended to get smote, and that at a time when God smote hard: when He smited you stayed smitten, smiting was no slap on the wrist (*Lake Wobegon Days*, p. 170).” I also think of an old Ziggy cartoon in which our little friend survives a plane crash only to land in the ocean in a place where he is surrounded by sharks. “What did I do to deserve this?” he asks, to which a voice from heaven replies, “Want a list?”

The threat of punishment can be a powerful motivator. It forms the backdrop of an issue some people in the reading from Luke bring to Jesus about whether the Galileans who died tragically did so because they were worse sinners. If you do wrong, God will get you! The medieval church used such a threat to coerce people into doing what it wanted them to, as in — hand over money to the church to save your soul from eternal punishment. And the people didn't have scripture in their language so that they could read and

interpret for themselves. They had to accept what church leaders said. It is a powerful strategy!

But there are some problems with it. For one thing, God doesn't seem to work this way anymore, if God ever did. If God zaps sinners, why did Hitler live so long and why is Putin still alive? Why don't the people around us we know are transgressing God's requirements for right living "get theirs" instead of thriving? Furthermore, if we are completely honest, we have to ask, "Why are we still here?"

Episcopal Bishop Michael Curry said in a commentary on Luke 13:1-9, "Frankly, if God was in the business of meting out judgment and curses in relation to our sins, there probably would not be anyone left on the planet (*Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 2, p. 95)."

So, God doesn't seem to work this way, thus there isn't much of a threat, and if God did, what would that say about God? It may be the worst manifestation of anthropomorphism to believe that God in anger seeks vengeance on all who disrespect God. There is such a thing as the wrath of God in scripture, but it is a last-ditch effort to get people to repent, not a nuclear act of Divine judgment.

What does Jesus say when he is asked if the Galileans died because they were worse sinners? He says, "No," categorically no, God does not work this way. Jesus does go on to talk about the need for repentance but in response to the frailty of life. We never know how much time we have to get things right. But neither here nor on any other occasion — and there are many times he is asked such a question in the Christian Testament — nowhere does he say suffering comes as punishment for sin.

So, we need something else to get our attention and move us toward repentance, and there is another strategy in our texts — grace. In the reading from Isaiah, after the prophet confronts the people about their shortcomings, he says, "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."

He goes on to say that God's thoughts are not our thoughts nor are God's ways our ways. Indeed, we would never be as gracious as God is with

people who have done us wrong, though when we are the ones in need of grace, we think it is a fine idea. We are a bit like Jonah who does not want God to save the people of Nineveh, so much so that he would rather die in the belly of a fish than be part of this act of grace. Even after God delivers him from the fish and he preaches the shortest sermon on record, when the people repent and are saved, he is furious. The story ends with him on the east side of the city, the highest point nearby, still hoping he can see the city burn!

There is a little Jonah in all of us. As a mentor of mine once said, we're all about grace and truth, like Jesus, only in our case, "Grace for me, truth for you." Thankfully, God doesn't work this way. God extends grace to us all, inviting us, not threatening but inviting us, to turn away from less noble things and toward God.

And we should note that Isaiah's call to repentance is addressed not just to individuals but to the nation as a whole. Repentance isn't just a personal endeavor, which means that grace can be extended to communities and nations as well, when they turn toward God.

In the reading from Luke, grace takes the form of time to get things right and whatever is needed to help us get it right. Jesus tells a story about a fig tree that has failed to produce fruit. It is part of an impressive collection of biblical texts where fig trees represent the human condition, which works for me, since I like figs and have wonderful memories connected to fig trees. There was one in my grandparents' backyard in Lincolnton amidst all the pecan trees, and when we grandkids and our friends camped out, we enjoyed the figs in addition to the other snacks we ate through the night.

In Genesis 3:7, fig leaves cover Adam and Eve in their new level of self-awareness. In Song of Solomon 2:13, the fruit of fig trees offers a harbinger of spring and unabashed love. In Deuteronomy 8:7-10 and 1 Kings 4:25, fig trees are a part of what points to a healthy and faithful nation, while Joel 1:7 notes that with an enemy invasion, the fig trees are splintered and their bark is stripped off and their branches turned white.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus curses a fig tree (Matthew 21:19; Mark 11:14), while in our reading from Luke, more time is given to the tree to produce. If the fig tree were to have emotions and the ability to express them, it would feel like the family members of preachers, always showing up in sermons... But it is used as a metaphor for human experience and

community. When we are not bearing fruit, Jesus says, God could give up on us, but instead God chooses to give us more time, for the point is to get us where we need to be, not judge us harshly.

My mother had a practice as an English literature professor that reflected this understanding. Students who did poorly on exams or papers were graded but then given feedback as well as an opportunity to retake an exam, somewhat altered, or re-write a paper. It meant extra work for my mother, she spent weekends and holidays grading, and students who did well the first time became angry, they didn't want others to have a second chance — grace for me, truth for you — but my mother contended that the point of education was to help students learn, not simply establish a pecking order of better and worse students.

God works like this in regard to the goals of righteousness, Jesus says, and not only this, God gives us resources to help us grow, in addition to more time. In the parable, the tree is given another year when the gardener will dig around it and put manure on it, a kind of fertilizer, to help it grow. Augustine said manure represents humility. It's difficult to argue with that... but it also represents our best efforts, with God's help, to make changes in our lives.

Michael Curry says he remembers the late Dr. Benjamin Elijah Hayes, President of Morehouse College, saying that faith is taking your best step and leaving the rest to God. That is how it works. Something is required of us, our best effort. But with God, grace abounds, there is always more than our effort involved. If we are to become who God creates us to become, we require the fertilizer of the Spirit to go along with our best digging.

None of this addresses situations where people have no interest in repentance. Neither threats of punishment nor assurances of grace matter to people who have no social conscience or belief in God. But for those who do, grace is a more effective strategy. Children of parents who inspire fear try to hide their indiscretions. Children who know they are loved are more likely to come clean. That's what God desires.