

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

March 20, 2022
The Third Sunday in Lent

Luke 13:1-9
Exodus 3:1-15
Psalm 63:1-8
1 Corinthians 10:1-13

If you are tired, raise your hand.

If there is a common experience right now in the world, it's that we are all tired. And, I'm not talking about the weariness that is remedied by a nice afternoon nap. I'm talking about that bone-tired feeling of pure exhaustion. Where your mind, body, and soul are so weak from simply trying to keep things together.

I want to take a moment to name what so many of us are feeling. We feel the depth of exhaustion that comes from seeing a world in crisis, from feeling uncertain about the future, from trying to make the right decisions in the midst of a pandemic, from keeping our kids healthy both mentally and physically, from keeping our relationships strong in the midst of disagreement and division.

As I list those things out I realize that it all sounds rather depressing. Surely, it's a lot to take in. And the tough reality is that this list is no exaggeration. So, I think that we need to be very honest with ourselves about the heaviness of this moment in time. It will do us no good to avoid the conversation because by avoiding it, we eliminate any chance for change. For me, I find that once I can name the weariness, once I can name the exhaustion and the frustration, then I can fully turn it over to God and start working for something better.

With that in mind, there are two very important points that we have been considering the past few Sundays. Those are: naming our pain and turning our pain over to God. Calling out our weariness and asking God for help. It's what we might refer to as confession and redemption. Those two things are good and important, but I want to add one additional directive that I believe is essential to overcoming our exhaustion. To confession and redemption, we must add cultivation.

Or, to put it into the context of our Gospel reading, we need to add *metanoia*, repentance, a change of heart, a change of action to our list of commitments.

To understand the Gospel lesson, I want you to understand what Jesus was actually saying when he said you must repent or perish in chapter 13 of Luke. Let me start by asking you this... how do you understand the concept of repentance? Is it a terminal action...as in once you repent all things will be well? Is it a final step in the process of confession?

I know I have often thought of repentance as the result of my confession and thus the secret ingredient to my forgiveness and redemption. I repent and all is made well. In that regard,

repentance is an aspirational action that was to be commended for the simple act of desiring forgiveness. But that's not the right interpretation of Jesus' teaching.

The word repent, or repentance, *metanoia* in Greek, isn't an end point at all. What Jesus is teaching is that by confessing and receiving the gift of redemption, you must commit to repenting or to cultivating a change within your life. Repentance is an active, ongoing change of heart, a change of action that requires your deliberate cultivation no matter what exhaustion may be holding you back.

And yet...cultivation is hard when you are tired. I get that. But we have got to get a second wind. Because, if we don't, what's the alternative?

In our parable from Luke, the fig tree asks us the same question. What is the alternative if we simply give up? If we stop trying to cultivate a new way of being, a new way of living as Jesus taught?

Consider this...consider that the story of the fig tree represents our fatigue; a fatigue where everyone seems to be languishing together where no one wants to cultivate a single thing. You know the old phrase...misery loves company. Well, it's especially true in this case...the unproductive nature of the fig tree has trickled down to the man who has been tending the tree for three years and the lethargy between the two grows. The man doesn't want to do any more work. He's discouraged and wants to just get rid of the tree and move on. Why keep trying, he wonders? I've worked so hard and there seems to be no point in my efforts. He wants to give up.

That's how discontent works. We start to lose hope and then we start to turn away from the things that matter, we stop trying to cultivate any kind of change. Worse, we start to point fingers at the problems instead of trying to find solutions. It becomes an insidious cycle. Where we should be bearing fruit, we give in to our parched and unproductive spirits.

Does that ring true for your soul right now? Where have you been like the man in our parable, tired and exhausted, discouraged, waiting year after year and month after month for a different outcome in your life? Where have you gotten bitter and started to point fingers at others for the discontent you feel? Where have you wanted to cut off those people or organizations or institutions that didn't bear the fruit you wanted them to bear?

There is an important point in this story that we need to take to heart right now...our lethargy is getting us nowhere. This is not the time to sit back in accusation or judgement of others. It's not the time to let your discontent boil over into your relationships. It's not the time to tap out and assume someone else will make things right.

The gardener says, give me a little more time. Let me dig a little deeper and turn the soil a few more times and tend to the ground with more care and more attention and let me see what might happen. Let me keep working, even though I am really worn out.

Notice this about the gardener...he doesn't let his tiredness overcome his desire for change. And he takes responsibility for doing the work that needs to be done. He commits to giving the tree every opportunity to heal, to grow, and to produce good fruit.

So, the question becomes, what do we do with this story? How does it change us? How does it help us claim *metanoia* today and tomorrow and every day after that? How does it give us that second wind to keep cultivating something good and true and just in this world?

I think it comes down to this....the gardener was able to put time and effort into the change the tree needed because he knew the tree had value. I love that the gardener doesn't state how much he expects the tree to produce. He doesn't put unrealistic expectations on the tree. He just believes that it is valuable and that it has potential to be more than it has been. And that potential is what matters.

What would it mean if you approached each person in your life with the belief that they held potential? I'm talking about even the people you are in conflict with, even the people you may have hurt, even the people you have been separated from. Could you work to repent of those divides? Could you work to create metanoia within those relationships? What if you believed that each person, each situation is worth every bit of your effort, worth every bit of that second wind we all need right now? What if you were worth that second wind?

When Jesus says repent or perish, I want to suggest he is saying that through our metanoia, our repentance, we are able to overcome any barrier to wholeness that the world throws at us. We are able to get back up time and time again because we believe in our own potential and the potential of this world. There truly is no other alternative. Amen.