

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

Sermon for March 20, 2022

THE GREAT PHYSICIAN By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: The one who is well does not need a physician, but the one who is sick.

One of the best and loveliest titles we use for our Lord is “The Great Physician of Souls,” and we see many examples in the gospels of Jesus operating in that capacity. Often we will see Jesus speaking with someone or responding to someone’s question, and what Jesus says or does seems unconnected with what is being directly said to him. And what we’re reminded of by that is how really good physicians are always looking closely at their patients, and trying to determine and address what the real causes of their problems are, even if that means looking past their self-diagnoses.

I remember a number of years back when I somewhat mysteriously started cracking my teeth. Every few months I went to my dentist because a new tooth had started hurting, and the X-Rays always showed the same thing – a crack – and the result was always the same: out with the tooth. I had a number of explanations for this having to do with natural aging and low calcium and the fact that I often chewed the ice cubes in my drinks and ate a lot of nuts and so on, plus several steps I planned on taking to deal with the problem; but after about the third tooth, my dentist said, “I’m going to make you a night guard. I suspect you grind your teeth when you’re sleeping.”

Well, he fitted me with the night guard and I hated it at first: I kept finding it on the floor beside my bed when I got up in the morning. But I kept at it and, long story

short, I haven't lost a tooth since then, and I doubt at this point that I could even fall asleep without that reassuring implement in my mouth.

My dentist didn't listen to what I told him: he saw through me to my real problem. He was, in this small illustration, the Great Dentist of my teeth.

I think the Gospel reading for this morning contains a lovely example of Jesus practicing his art as the great physician of souls, although it's not usually interpreted that way. Let's read it together, and see what we can make of it.

Luke 13: 1-9

This selection has two separate parts. The first is a dialogue between Jesus and his disciples concerning a question that troubled them; and the second is a parable. And the parable is clearly meant to be a response in some sense to the problem discussed in the first part.

It was one of the pillars of Jewish thought during the centuries leading up to the time of Christ that there was a God-ordained causal connection between obeying the laws of God and material well-being. According to this way of thinking, you could gauge the quality of a man's spiritual life by the degree of his material good fortune. If someone had a satisfying life, a life of many years, of health, of prospering and devoted children, of good reputation in the community, it must be the case that he was on good terms with God, which in the Jewish way of thinking meant that he never sinned against God by failing to follow God's many laws.

And conversely, if someone was subject to ill health, financial setbacks, disobedient children, and so on, it must mean that that person had somehow found displeasure with God. The whole book of Job in the OT is basically a reflection on this particular way of thinking.

And that's what makes the disciples' question to Jesus in our reading a perfectly natural question. They cite a couple of recent cases of calamity that befell a group of individuals: one where Pontius had a group of Galileans murdered who had come to Jerusalem to worship; and the other a crowd of people who had fallen to their death or been crushed when a bridge in Jerusalem collapsed. According to the Jewish way of thinking, both of these terrible occurrences must have meant that

there was something spiritually wrong with these victims. So that's what the disciples ask Jesus to confirm.

Jesus' answer is short and to the point. "No," he says, "these people were no better or worse than everybody else." But then he seems abruptly to pivot and almost attack his own disciples when he says, "Unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

This passage is used as a tool from the pulpit or in commentaries for urging an immediate conversion and commitment to Christ. Don't wait for tomorrow, today, today is the day of your salvation. Tomorrow may be too late!

But I don't think that's what Jesus is teaching his disciples here. For one thing, they're already his followers. But even if they weren't, he's surely not saying that unless they convert immediately, Pilate will have them killed or a bridge will fall on them.

No, I think Christ's instruction can be found if we look at the second part of the passage, the parable. In the parable, a man plants a fig tree, and for three years it produces no fruit, so he decides to tear it out of the ground and throw it away until another man, another wiser man, tells him to give it more time.

In other words, the parable seems to be advocating patience, not being in such a hurry. And it would be very confusing, at least to a slow thinker like me, to use a parable advocating patience to illustrate the importance of getting something done here, today, right now, rather than delaying it into the future.

So how exactly does the parable speak to the situation described on the first part of the passage, and particularly to the surprising and somewhat shocking words of Christ with which it concludes: "Unless you repent, you shall likewise perish."

We all know by now that 'repentance' doesn't mean pounding on your chest or wearing sackcloth or pouring dust on your head. It doesn't even mean feeling terrible about yourself or kicking yourself or experiencing the awful bite of conscience – although it certainly doesn't rule those things out either.

What both the Greek and Aramaic words that are translated 'repentance' mean is simply 'changing your mind'; so what Jesus is teaching us is that unless we change

our minds, change our way of looking at the world and looking at ourselves, change our focus outward towards others and upward towards our Father, rather than inward towards ourselves, that we will keep heading in the direction that diminishes us spiritually, that leads us away from the Father and deeper into the trackless wilderness of our own devices, of our own plans, of our own pride.

Throughout the NT the concept of dead and dying is used, not to speak of physical death, but of the state or process of being separated from God. Here's just one example from Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)(Eph. 2: 5)

“Unless you repent,” Jesus says. And who is he talking to here? He's talking to the disciples who asked him about those Galileans who were killed, whether that meant they had some special moral fault – hidden perhaps from public view – so that we could regard the awful fate that befell them at Pilate's hand as somehow divine justice. “Did they deserve their fate because of their moral failings?” they ask their teacher.

And Jesus answers, “No, of course not. But unless *you* – you who are asking me *this*, unless *you* start thinking in a different way, you will be moving farther away from our Father, instead of closer to him. Your spirits will be tending towards darkness rather than light, away from life, towards life's opposite.”

And so we are led by Christ to look at the question itself, that the disciples asked, or even deeper, we're led to look at the state of mind, the way of thinking, that leads the disciples to ask the question.

“What was wrong with those Galileans?” the disciples wanted to know. “What sins were they hiding? They were killed, for goodness sake, while offering sacrifices in the temple. From every external point of view they were good, pious, religious folks, engaged in worshipping God. And yet they were slaughtered. Since God is just, there must have been something about them we don't know, some dark side, perhaps some original sin. In all events, something that brought down God's wrath.”

And Jesus says in response, “Unless **you** stop thinking like that...”

Thinking like what?

Thinking like our central focus must be in finding fault with others. “What was wrong with those people?” the disciples want to know. And Jesus says, “Look to yourself.”

“Judge not, lest ye be judged,” Jesus tells us elsewhere (Matthew 7:1); “Take the beam out of your own eye (7:5).

The foundational relationship upon which the kingdom of God is built is that between the individual and God the father. Not between a family and God, not between a church and God, not between a nation and God. Between me and God, you and God.

Look again at the parable Jesus provides to help us understand why repentance is so important. A man plants a fig tree, and for three years it produces no fruit, so he decides to tear it out of the ground and throw it away until another, wiser man, tells him to give it more time.

We are not God, we cannot know or understand the heart, the spirit, of anyone except ourselves, any more than the man in the parable was in any position to judge the fig tree. And yet there is a tremendous temptation that is deeply rooted in human nature to paint the worst possible picture of others, in order to delay dealing honestly with ourselves.

As there are ways of using our bodies that lead towards physical death, so there are ways of using our spirits that lead towards spiritual death. Christ’s disciples were focused on exposing and judging the hidden moral failings of those Galileans, and it is that preoccupation, that state of mind, that Christ rebukes when he tells them, “Unless **you** change your way of thinking, your spiritual fate will be no different than was their physical fate.”

“Stop grinding your teeth,” my dentist told me, and I haven’t lost a tooth since. “Take the beam out of your own eye,” my Lord tells me, and I have to believe that he, the great physician, is telling me that for my own good.

And so, Father, let this be our prayer this morning, that you strengthen us as we strive towards maturity in self-examination. Life is so short, and time's a thief, Father, and so we pray that you help us resist the temptation to waste the time we've been given dwelling on the faults of others, rather than tending to our own. And we pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, who repeatedly cautioned us against that sort of spiritual disease. Amen.