

Sermon for 2/28/2016

Isaiah 55: 1-9

Psalms 63: 1-8

1 Corinthians 10: 1-13

Luke 13: 1-9

SPIRITUAL PROCRASTINATION

By Rev. Dr. Donald Algeo

You often hear it said that everyone has a special gift. Some people have a musical gift, some a gift for sports, some a gift for public speaking, some a gift for telling a joke. Some people have a gift for making friends, others a gift for making money. We say, "He really has a gift for gab," or "She has a gift for putting people at ease."

And so on and so on.

Well, it just so happens that I also have a special gift. I have a gift for procrastination.

What makes my gift special is that procrastination doesn't mean just putting things off until some undefined later date. Merely lazy people do that, but procrastinators – at least those like me with a special gift – do more than just put things off. The true art and skill of procrastination lie in not only putting things off, but in convincing others and perhaps even oneself – sometimes only oneself – that putting things off is in fact a reasonable thing to do, that it might even be the best and wisest course of action.

Here's what I mean, speaking from my own experience. The field in which I personally most commonly exercise my gift is that area of hostile enemy territory that surrounds my house, commonly known as the yard.

I have been known to argue that raking leaves in the fall is in fact detrimental to the grass below because those leaves provide a layer of protection against the winter's killing cold.

As for the grass itself, it has long been my position that to insure optimal health, grass must not be cut before it is at least 6" tall, and then only if the temperature is between 68 and 72 degrees.

I do not believe in pruning bushes, because they are after all living beings too, with feelings just like you and me.

Perhaps my crowning achievement in the way of procrastination was a couple of years ago, when I managed to convince myself that it was counterproductive to weed the garden, but that on the contrary the weeds should be allowed to flourish in the garden to provide a sort of living mulch for the plants I was trying to grow.

It's perhaps needless to say that I did not harvest much from my garden that summer.

Our gospel reading for this morning is often interpreted as a warning against procrastination, and I think that's probably correct, although not in the way it's usually taken. Let me explain what I mean.

Jesus is asked about an episode that had apparently happened once in the temple in Jerusalem. We're not given much detail about it, but it seems that King Herod had ordered that some worshippers from Galilee be murdered, presumably when they had come up to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices during one of the Jewish festivals. Since that seems terribly wrong, the disciple questioning Jesus wonders whether it meant that these Galilean worshippers must in fact have done something to deserve such a terrible fate.

Jesus' answer is short and to the point. "No," he says, "these Galileans were no better or worse than everybody else." But then he seems to jump to another topic altogether, when he says, "Unless you repent, you will likewise perish."

"Unless you repent, you will likewise perish." That sounds an awful lot like a warning against procrastination, doesn't it?

But what sort of procrastination is under consideration here?

The passage is often used from the pulpit as a tool for emphasizing the urgency of making a commitment for Christ, another way of driving home the message Paul makes in another context, that ‘now is the day of your salvation.’ (2 Cor 6: 2)

Now any tool that can be employed with the object of bringing people to a deliberate and conscious commitment to Christ is being put to good use; but be that as it may, I myself don’t think that’s the sort of procrastination Jesus was concerned about when he spoke these words, for at least two reasons.

The first reason is that that’s not what Jesus says. He doesn’t say “Believe in me, otherwise you will perish.”

And the second becomes evident when we look at the parable which Jesus immediately provides to expand on the point he is making. 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 although I do believe it’s fair to say Jesus is concerned with procrastination, I think it’s procrastination of a very special kind. It’s certainly not the kind that I have turned into something approaching an art form when it comes to doing yardwork.

And I also don’t think he is concerned with what we might call ‘commitment procrastination,’ frightening people into making a particular declaration or commitment, the way a used car salesman might pressure a customer into signing on the dotted line because this deal is good for today and today only.

What Jesus is dealing with is what I would call spiritual procrastination. So what is this spiritual procrastination?

Let's take the 'spiritual' part of it first. When Jesus says "Unless you repent you will likewise perish," he is obviously not saying that he expects that his listeners will die by being murdered by Herod. He is not speaking of physical death. As always, his concern is with the heavenly realm, the true reality, and our participation in it. In other words, he's concerned with our spirit, with what elevates the spirit, on the one hand, and with what diminishes the spirit, on the other.

"Unless you repent," he says. 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.

"Unless you repent," he 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 Herod'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.

That’s the spiritual part of it; where is the procrastination part of it?

By now you’re probably way ahead of me. So much of our spiritual life, don’t you agree?, is dedicated to bringing others under judgment, and so much of that, I would suggest, is because of our reluctance to let God’s searchlight rest on us.

We’re moving into the political loony-tunes world of a presidential election season, and one thing you’ll notice is that America isn’t divided between Republicans and Democrats: it’s divided between those who think Democrats are evil, and those who think Republicans are evil.

What does Christ teach us? Look at the parable he 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 that's where the procrastination comes in. For 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.

I could of course prune my own bushes, but I'm doing so much more good for the world by spreading the word about the preciousness of all life. Of course I could go out and weed my garden, but it's more important to serve the interest of science by conducting this experiment.

Condemning others is so easy and enjoyable, like reading a good book instead of mowing the lawn. And it's the right thing to do, after all, because we're spreading the truth about them, we're shining the light of truth on them, so that the rest of the world can realize how nasty and evil they truly are.

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."

What then is spiritual procrastination? It's taking the easy path of judging others rather than the difficult path of judging oneself. And why is it difficult? Because it requires humility and diligence, because it's unnatural, because it's work. Because it might cost us something, when we are so happy with the way we already are. Because it might even mean, cutting the grass before it's 6" tall.

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 lawn. And we pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, who repeatedly cautioned us against that sort of spiritual procrastination. Amen.