

NOT WHAT WE DESERVE
[written in oral style]

Isaiah 55:109; Luke 13:1-9
Lent 3, Year C

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Who am I? Who are you?
Not, **what** are you, but Who are you?

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Our system is structured to label us by our outward status, our culture, or achievements.  
There is reward for what we do, and very little recognition for “Who we are”.

Some examples: a person will earn a university degree if they pass all the required steps, no matter who they are.

Fulfill expectations at work, and you will get title, advancement, and of course money.

With hard earned money, you can buy things.  
You earned it. You can have things.

Isaiah presents a different paradigm where epicurean food can be enjoyed without money.  
How can that be?

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In the church domain, behaviour and beliefs are important. How we act and our theological stance build connections and acceptance.
Belonging is a human necessity.
And so is love. We need acceptance—belonging and love.

Yet, we tend to be uncomfortable with raw authenticity.
We value love....but...love needs authenticity to thrive.
Apparently, we grasp a limited love, and how can that be?

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Perhaps, we are trapped in our society’s system of earning what we receive / of reinforcing **what** we are and glossing over **who** we are.  
I think we are afraid to be too revealing. Afraid of rejection.  
So, we settled for limited love.  
Limited love,..... is that even possible? ????  
That could explain our struggle to connect with God, who is Love. ???

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Moreover, there are a painful, unjust exceptions to our illusion of getting what you deserve.

Does this assumption equally apply to the BIPOC community?
And, the LGBTQ community still have to fight for acceptance.

In addition, those who are less fortunate and those who have made bad mistakes are deemed less deserving, even unlovable.

That is what happens when we focus on “What” a person is.

Ignoring the “Who” also empowers brutal despots and populists. They gain power from “what” they have done. Few every ask “Who” are they until there is war and destruction.

So, beware of the system that values “what” we are and the sense of entitlement!

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Both of today’s texts show that God’s way is not based on you get what you deserve.

Many of us are out of synch with God, and that causes personal, internal torment.

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The human search for meaning is not a new phenomenon.

The prophet Isaiah addresses all those who are thirsting for that indescribable something “more” in life that will nourish in ways that food and money cannot.

The Isaiah’s passage presents the invitation to abundant life which includes mercy, acceptance, and a relationship with our Creator.

Most people have a deep uneasiness with life.

There is an inner stirring, an inner hunger....

We need.... We want.... We search...

We want fulfilment and contentment—inner peace.

And, the frustrating thing is that the answers / the fulfilment and peace are not in our domain, they are not under our control.

We cannot earn it.

Moreover, what we generally assume will satisfy our torment is Not what we think it is.

That's the rub for a lot of people.

God's ways are not our ways, nor are God's thoughts our thoughts.

I think we know this at a visceral level.

Yet, we have been conditioned to behave otherwise.

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Much of the Western World, upon learning of the Russian military casualties, conclude “They are getting what they deserve.”

That is not God’s way.

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The first half of the Luke passage needs some unpacking.

Jesus is talking with a group of people, and some of them mention a terrible incident that had recently occurred.

By their presentation and the tone of their voices Jesus could tell what they were getting at.

The horrific incident was about the Galileans who were killed in the temple by Pilate while they were preparing their animals for sacrifice.

Galilee had the reputation as a breeding ground for revolutionaries, and the assumption presented was that the Galileans got what they deserved.

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Jesus strongly countered that accusation and age-old myth that *bad things happen to bad people, and good benefits are proof that a person is good.*

Jesus underlines his point by calling them to repent—to change their way of thinking.

Twice in this text Jesus presented the need to repent.

Jesus continued by citing another horrific event where 18 people were killed when a water tower fell on them, and adds the same message as before—denying the correlation of the bad thing to a bad person.

Again, Jesus called those around him to repent / to confess the error and change.

Jesus was trying to debunk the simple logic of you get what you deserve. That deduction is at the core of the theology of prosperity. And, that theology still thrives!

It proclaims winners are better / might makes right / money entitles one to privilege, and a comfortable life is evidence that God is on your side.

We may outwardly reject that theology, yet when something bad happens to us we tend to ask, “What did I do to deserve this?”

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Nevertheless, there is more to this dialogue than what appears on the surface.

Josephus, the ancient historian, wrote that these killings were the result of Pilate’s counter revolutionary activities. Pilate was a ruthless and nasty person, and had a propensity for killing Galileans, which included Jesus.

In 35 CE, Rome finally had to remove Pilate from power because of his extreme brutality.

The fallen water tower was not just an innocent accident.

Pilate was stealing money from the temple to build a 200 furlong aqueduct. The Jews were very upset by this.

However, as happens today, most kept quiet, minded their own business, and did not protest because they did not want to jeopardize their comfortable lives. And, they justified their

compliance by believing that the good things they had in life were a sign that God was on their side.

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Some people decided to do something about Pilate's injustices. They practised civil disobedience in the form of sabotaging the construction. Josephus wrote that Pilate sent troops out to deal with the sedition. The Roman soldiers chased away most of the protesters, and killed the rest.

The water tower accident was likely NOT an accident, but a mass murder.  
The Antiquities Of The Jews, Book 18, Chapter 3 paragraph 2 The Works of Josephus.

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There is a double message here, and they both present quite a conundrum for us!
The messages are: do not buy into society's "you get what you deserve".... And....do not think that it is okay to prosper from a society that is doing evil and injustices.

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Everyone, everyone needs to belong / to be accepted and respected.... AND... everyone needs to be Loved.

God's way lifts up the lowly. God's way values the "who."

If we are not aligned with that and living that way, then change is necessary. Repentance, as Jesus stated, is needed.

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It is told that King Wilhelm of Prussia made a "mercy" visit to the central prison in Berlin. He planned to pardon one prisoner. According to the story, the king found himself surrounded by a host of prisoners, all of whom had stories about how innocent they were, and how unjust it was that they were jailed.

All, so they said, were victims of mistaken identity, or were framed, or victims by crooked police and corrupt judges, or some such thing.

Every one had a claim on the king's mercy, all except one silent man who stayed off to the side.

The king noticed him and called him over, asking, "What crime were you accused of?"
The prisoner answered, "Armed robbery."

"Were you guilty?" the king petitioned.

"Yes, I was." He confessed.

With that King Wilhelm summoned the warden, saying, "Release this man at once! I cannot have this guilty criminal remaining in prison, corrupting the morals of all these innocent men!"

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Perhaps, confession is good?  
Perhaps, repentance makes a difference?

Nevertheless, we have a complex problem.

If we are to truly embrace love,  
If we are to honour who we are and who others are, then we all must be open and authentic.

Dare we, can we risk that?  
Living by “what” we are is a lot safer. Yet, there are injustices with that and love is greatly diminished.  
And, we are tormented by our “limited” relationship with God.. and all of creation because of our limited love.  
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Moreover, can we love others when we learn their flaws.  
**CAN we be loved?** We know “Who” we are.  
This is a problem.

So, Jesus told a parable.

By outward appearances, there is a strong and stout fig tree, likely close to 10 metres tall.

The apparent owner of the tree is extremely disappointed in the tree because it does not bear fruit.

The owner tells the gardener to cut it down; it is a waste.

The gardener begs to give the tree one more year to bear fruit.  
The gardener would nurture and feed the tree.  
The gardener would give it what it needs to thrive, and then it is up to the tree to respond.

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Who was mistaken as a gardener after the resurrection?
Who created the garden of Eve?
Who is the gardener?
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The gardener is the loving, redeeming face of God we know as Christ.

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I think we humans are the owner of the tree and the tree represents our outward presentation / our “What” we are.  
And, we are not satisfied. We are not content.

We are missing what is life giving.  
We are missing the fruit of the spirit.

The call to “cut down” is a reflection of our disgust / our desire to reject **what** we are? What we are is inhibiting being loved.  
I think we are the judge.  
And there are many ways to render destruction.

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We need to be loved / to be accepted.
We need to be known by “who” we are.

The gardener comes to us with hope / with nourishment / with redemption. The gardener loves regardless.
God Loves. God provides.
We DO NOT deserve that second chance.
That passion for restoration is from love / from God and it is an offer of grace.

I think grace must be received to be grace.
If not received, it is merely a loving offer.

Grace must be received. []

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But, what if a year goes by and we have not changed?  
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That would truly be our loss.

Even so, we would read this parable again.  
God is patient and loving.....and gracious.