

“Are you going to get any better ... or is this it!”<sup>1</sup>

March 3, 2013

## I

Well, let's think about our Gospel scene this morning. See, the folks in Luke's story want to know what *Jesus* thinks ... about why those particular Galileans were slaughtered by Pilate's men ... wanted to know about those who were caught beneath the tower of Siloam ... what about them? Were they worse than the others standing just out of range of the falling stones? Did they all deserve what happened to them ... or not? “So Jesus, what do you think?”

Well Jesus doesn't really answer them at any length, does He? Doesn't get into the “Why” question at all really. Other than to say “No ... those murdered ... those crushed ... they weren't worse than all the rest. But! And then he veers off into the unsettling point he wants to make here. “But unless you repent, you'll all perish just as *they* did!”

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Now His point apparently is that time runs out. And unless you peer deeply into your own self—turn to God ... shift your life around ... you're gonna die!”

See, as someone's pointed out, it's like Jesus says, “No, there's no connection between your suffering and your sin.” Well great! But on the other hand, unless you repent, you're gonna be snuffed out like a wick!” Oh.

Well, is this comforting or not?

See, I imagine these folks are scared ... in fact, maybe terrified ... about all the horrible things swirling round them. A little bit like us maybe. And they're

trying to figure out the game, you know ... how to control ... predict the bad stuff that crushes some ... and not others. Why? ... maybe lying awake at night trying to figure out the rules.

And so here they ask Jesus: “How’s it work?” “Is that how it works?” And He says no ... but! ... making the point He wants to make here about repentance.

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So does this calm their fears? Or yours? Probably not. But I think maybe Jesus uses that fear ... and ours ... so that they ... and we ... can learn something very important here—something essential for our life.

So. The topic here is sin, is repentance, is conversion of our embodied selves while there’s still time. Not a happy topic, for sure. But an appropriate one I think for Lent. So let’s talk about sin and repentance and conversion of life for a few minutes this morning.

## II

Now while Jesus just implies sin in general, Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is a little more concrete, gives us a catalogue of sorts. So he talks about idolatry, sexual immorality ... even griping, complaining, kvetching about getting the short end of the stick. Sort of a scale of big sins to everyday faults.

Well, most of us probably fall somewhere along that line, don’t we. You know, probably committing small bore sins for the most part.

Or are they? Anne Lamott has a new, delightful book out titled *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers*. And in it, she defines *deep* sin this way: “Sin is *not* visiting the adult book store on the corner. No, deep sin is the hard

heart, the lack of generosity, and all the isms – racism and sexism and so forth.” So that’s Lamott’s definition of deep sin.

Anyway, let me tell you a story to make her point. And bear with me ... maybe about a five-, six-minute story that struck me as important ... and to the point that I want to make this morning.

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Doris Grumbach is one of my favorite writers. And in her memoir titled *Coming into the End Zone*, she tells the following story.

Seems she was in New York—at a literary Board meeting—and doing some shopping in preparation for a trip to Paris with her daughter. At the end of her meeting, and before meeting her daughter for dinner, she buys a cup of coffee and sits on a bench at 44<sup>th</sup> Street and Sixth Avenue.

She says “While I sip my coffee, I watch a street lady eating a hot dog on a roll. And she converses with herself between bites in a loud, harsh voice and shakes her head at what I assume are the answers she hears in her head.

She says, “her hair is composed of switches pinned, it seems, to a wig base, and at the top there’s a great heavy bun. Her eyebrows are crusted and red, the same flush that covers her light brown skin and culminates in an angry red nose. Her body is very thin under a coat composed, like her hair, of parts that are pinned together ...

“She finishes her hot dog, rises slowly, and walks to the trash container near the door to the office building. She moves as if her steps are painful. Her face suggests misery and resentment, as though the weight of all the bunches of cloth

tacked onto her were depressing her spirits. She returns to her bench. ... She wipes her mouth on her fingers and then puts them in her mouth. I shudder.”

Then Grumbach says, “I finish my coffee, stand up to walk to the trash container and, inexplicably, fall on my face. There’s pain in my right ankle that turned and caused me to fall, and greater pain in my shoulder, so intense that I cannot get up. So I lie there. Then before long I see two sets of feet in designer shoes pass me by without breaking stride. I try to think of a strategy that will get me on my feet, but without the use of my left arm and hand nothing works.

“Then I see a brown hand near my face and hear the street lady’s rough voice say: ‘Here. Hold on here.’

“I do as she says, doubling my arm against hers and gripping her loose flesh as she holds mine. She pulls hard, I hold tight, I am up, dizzy. She puts her arm around my shoulders and puts me down on the bench. She sits beside me.

“Well the next hour I remember ... with disbelief. This street lady – Nancy – Nancy and I talk about her life while she inquires about my pain and dizziness and advises me about therapy. ‘Don’t get up yet,’ she says, ‘or you’ll conk out.’ I think about finding a telephone to tell my daughter, who might still be at work at the Ballet Society, to tell her to meet me here instead of in front of the library.

“So I ask Nancy, ‘Is there a telephone in this office building?’ She says, ‘Yes, but whatever you do don’t use it . The A T and T puts devils on the wires and they get into your ears.’

“So I give up my idea of calling Jane for fear of offending Nancy.

“She tells me she has money to buy a winter coat but storekeepers won’t let her try their coats on. Silently I determine to come back and find her, take her to a store for a coat, try it on, and then let her buy it.

“So we talk on ... Now it seems Nancy shares a room in a welfare hotel on 46<sup>th</sup> Street with three other women; they sleep in one bed in shifts. In warm weather she prefers to bed down in the doorways of her street, where the mattress devils can’t get at her.

“ ‘Winter is the worst,’ she says. ‘Even now, in October, it’s too cold.’

Grumbach says, “Well then after a while, I glance at my watch. Five-thirty. I get up with difficulty. ‘I’ll walk with you,’ she says, but I say no, I can make it now.

“I thank her and give her a hug and tell her I hope to get back to New York soon and then I’ll look her up at her hotel. She says, ‘O. K. But watch out for that devil at the front door ... he’s into voodoo and hexing.’

“I say I will, and limp down Forty-second Street to find an Ace bandage for my swollen ankle. Next morning, my daughter takes me to the Ballet’s orthopedic fellow who takes care of me.”

Grumbach ends her story though with this reflection: She says, “but you know ... already, in all the night’s pain and the next day’s scurry to be relieved by medicine, the memory of Nancy seems to fade. Will I look her up if I come to New York at the end of the month for our trip to Paris? Probably not ... knowing how such resolves usually end for me.”

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And the cock crows. If you get my meaning.

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Jesus says, “Unless you repent ... you will die.” And there’s so much to repent, isn’t there. Again, not the small bore stuff so much ... but the deeper sins ... the contempt for others, the not-my-table attitude toward the misery all around ... the designer shoes walking right by the woman who has just fallen on her face in the street, fleeting good intentions but no follow-through to really help; the rejoicing in others’ failures, spiritual apathy and emptiness, mean, crabbed lives full of ungenerosity, bitter anger, hatred of brother or sister.

See, it doesn’t matter what side you stand on, there are sinners standing with you. Doesn’t matter what side of the abortion issue, doesn’t matter what side of the hate crimes issue, doesn’t matter what side of the gun control issue you stand on, there are sinners standing with you. It doesn’t matter whether you stand inside the church or outside of it, there are sinners standing with you. And all ... you ... and you ... and I ... need to repent ... or die ... inside ... little by little ... until nothing is left but the shell.

So if you and I want to be more than a barren fig tree, I think we have to face the truth of our lives. While there is still time to repent ... and change.

### III

Remember that quote by Lily Tomlin? She asks, “Are you going to get any better ... or is this it!”

So here’s the deal. Change we must. Oh never becoming perfect—no one’s perfect but God—but at least better over the time we’re given. And this is the season to look hard into our lives. And try.

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So what's the good news here folks? Where's the grace in this sermon, in this message from the Gospel this morning? Well this is what I think. I think that the good news is this.

God's judgment is never separated from God's mercy. See, that's the whole point of Jesus' little parable about the man who planted a fig tree ... that tree that in all justice, really ought to be cut down. Yet the Gardener pleads with the owner, "Wait ... wait ... give it time. Give it time to bear fruit before cutting it down."

And see that's grace—especially when you have yet to bear the good fruit that God expects from you ... if you have not yet blossomed into what God created you to be. God's delay is God's gift. God's delay ... is God's gift. So there *is* still time for you and me ... by God's grace.

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So finally – where do you start on that daily walk of repentance and change? Where? Well I guess you can start just where you are. 'Cause I believe you do find God in your daily rounds. And that includes finding God in the suffering who cross your path ... the Nancys who are there in your life if you just have eyes to see.

You know, like visiting those shut-ins who God seems to have entrusted to your care—various relatives ... or neighbors – aging, possibly annoying. Like stricken friends from your church, like folks in jails or other institutions – who might even be related to you – who might even benefit from hearing your own resurrection story.

Anne Lamott says her personal belief is that God looks through God's Rolodex when He has a certain kind of desperate person in mind, and assigns that

person to some screw-up like you or me, and makes it hard for you to ignore that person's suffering ... 'cause He does so nag you and me, doesn't He! And so you show up even when it's extremely inconvenient or just plain awful to be there.

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So finally ... look into your heart and examine your life. 'Cause your sin – recognizing it, naming it – can also be your hope ... to be better than that ... while there's still time. Leading you to the Gospel truth of your life.

Which is this. God's patience ... God's grace ... God's mercy ... trump God's justice – giving you every chance to do it better. This *is* Gospel truth. Gospel enough ... to save your life.

Amen.

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1. Resources used: *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* by Anne Lamott; *Coming into the End Zone* by Doris Grumbach; *Speaking of Sin* by Barbara Brown Taylor; *Synthesis* for March 3, 2013; and “God gives us Time,” found in *Pulpit Resource* for March 3, 2013.