

Second Chances

March 3, 2013

Luke 13:1-9

Author Anne Tyler tells a very interesting story in her book, *Saint Maybe*, published by Random House. It's about a fellow named Ian Bedloe.

One evening, as Ian was out walking, he passed a building with a sign that read, "the Church of the Second Chance." Ian wasn't sure what made him stop. It might have been the sign at the intersection that said "DON'T WALK" that made him give it a second thought.

It was ordinary, just an abandoned store. But he went in. He saw about twenty people standing, singing, and turning to look at him and smile when the bell clanged on the door as he entered.

It was a Wednesday evening prayer service and Ian found a seat. Each time a member brought a concern to the congregation, the preacher led them in silent prayer, ending with a resounding "Amen."

Ian found himself standing when the preacher asked for the third time, "Any other prayers?"

"I used to be good," he told them. "Or I used to be not bad, at least. I don't know what happened. Everything I touch goes wrong . . . Pray for me to be good again . . . Pray for me to be forgiven"

Somehow, Ian felt washed in their silent prayers that were just for his forgiveness. "How could God not listen?" he wondered.

After the service, Ian was shocked when the pastor, a Rev. Emmett, approached him and asked what he'd done that needed forgiveness. Resisting the urge to run, Ian said he'd caused his brother's suicide by telling him that his wife had been unfaithful. His brother's wife had, in turn, killed herself. It looked like Ian's parents would be raising three more children.

Ian asked Rev. Emmett if he was forgiven.

"Goodness no," Rev. Emmett said.

Unfair! Ian thought. He thought God forgave everything. Yes, Rev. Emmett told him, "But you can't just say, 'I'm sorry, God.' Why, anyone could do that much! You have to offer reparation – concrete, practical reparation, according to the rules of our church"

That's how Ian ended up dropping out of school and helping his parents raise his brother's children.

Second chance. The fig tree in today's gospel reading got one because of a caring gardener – one last, important second chance.

This story, I believe, represents a very good depiction of Jesus, bringer of second chances.

At least twice in the Hebrew Scriptures, other religious leaders negotiate with God for second chances. In Genesis 18, Abraham gets God to agree to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if there are ten righteous men in the towns.

When Moses was delayed on Mt. Sinai and the people made idols of gold and worshiped them, God's anger was so fierce that it threatened to "consume them" (Ex 32:10). But Moses begged God not to do it, reminding God of the covenant made with the Israelites. "And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (32:14).

(Here again bringing up the issue we have discussed often in our Wednesday Bible Study – can you change God's mind!)

Second chances. The fig tree got it, but it had to change. No fruit next season – no tree next season. In human terms it's called reparation.

Often, we in the liberal Protestant church settle for what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor and theologian called "cheap grace" – forgiveness not only without reparation but also without repentance.

As we sit in the security of our pews on Sunday mornings, confessing sins through a prayer that someone else wrote, there's no Rev. Emmett to remind us that, in the realm of God, saying "I'm sorry" is only the first step. It's too easy, even for pastors, to practice "cheap grace."

I know firsthand. I've had too many women tell me about abusive fathers or husbands, only to find myself standing around talking with these men after worship as if their horrible acts had not been committed.

While nothing might be the right thing to say in those moments, it seems like, "Good to see you," and, "How are you" are really disingenuous.

Twice in today's Gospel reading Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish" (13:3, 5). We tend to think of this perishing as happening at the end of time. But I believe Jesus was talking to the people of his time about their present time, the then.

And I think we can honestly say that this teaching applies just as accurately to us today.

What we do or don't do always matters. Consider how very hard it is for most of us to even tell someone we've wronged that we're sorry. Every time we fail to make things right, we erect barriers in our relationships, and behind those barriers we perish a little in the here and now.

Second chances. Usually, when Jesus forgives sinners, he tells them to go and sin no more. In other words, do something about your situation. That's what reparation is about. It's doing something not only to acknowledge that what we did was wrong, but also that what we will now do is, if not immediately right, at least is our best effort to get back on the right track.

There is a message for everyone in this parable of Jesus which is our gospel lesson for today. . God extends mercy and grace to all. He provides and meets needs. He loves and cares. But God has his limits. He looks to see what we will do with what he has given us.

CF raised a very good question in our "Ask the Pastor" session last Sunday: Does everyone have the Holy Spirit? My answer was that I believe the Holy Spirit is available to everyone who sincerely seeks him and asks for him. But God's Spirit is not forced on anyone, and it is certainly possible to reject it.

There definitely are those who reject and resist the love and mercy of God as well as those who take from God but do not care about ever giving to God. And I think the message of this parable is to these.

In this parable, the man is a symbol of God. The tree is symbolic of us, God's people. God put us here. We are his. He planted us. We are not children of chance. God has a plan for our lives,

In the parable, the man expected fruit on his tree and came looking for it. He did all he could for the tree to help it bear fruit. . He had a caretaker. He selected a place for it. He had it watered, dressed, and fertilized. No labor was spared on this fruit tree. The man had a right to expect fruit from this tree.

God has a right to expect fruit from our lives. God made us. He has been good to us. He has put each of us into a place where we can serve him. He has worked with each of us over the years of our lives. He has spared no labor on us and has done everything possible for us to become what he would have us to be.

And God wants to see us bear fruit. God wants to see the fruit of service and character. I won't take time to read it this morning, but I encourage you to read the 6th chapter of Galatians for a description of the fruits of the spirit that ought to be in the lives of God's children.

Leaves and fruit both take strength from the tree but fruit helps all while leaves help nothing but the tree. Leaves at times do not even help the tree. Leaves are sometimes purged or pruned in order to give strength to the fruit.

Many of us have leaves in our lives that are sapping our strength so as to keep us barren. The leaves of sin, bad habits, worldliness, laziness, and unconcern are among a few. Too often we put too much of our energy into leaves and not enough into fruit.

In our parable, the man has been patient with the tree for three years. From the context we see that this was too long to wait for this type of tree to bear fruit.

God has been long-suffering with most of us. God has waited years for many of us to serve him as he intends for us to serve him. The long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah. . He waited in the days of Lot. He waited in the days of Israel's wanderings. The long-suffering of God waits today. How long has God been waiting for you and me?

And maybe an even more important question is one raised by many today – how much longer will God wait. We can't answer that question, of course. But it doesn't seem wise to me to continue to try God's patience.

The keeper of the garden in the parable asks for more time. He asks for one more year. Maybe the dresser of the garden saw possibilities not previously seen. Maybe he saw some little buds that indicated possible fruit. Maybe he had worked with the tree so long that he just had a love for it.

Whatever the reason, he interceded for the tree and was heard. Here we see intercessory prayer in parable form.

The owner gave the tree one more year. God in his mercy has given us more time. Maybe God is giving more time because someone prayed and stood before God on your behalf. Maybe God sees in your heart a slow stir and hunger for him.

Maybe it is because someone has prayed long and hard for you like a mother, dad, Sunday School teacher, or pastor – maybe like Rev. Emmett in the story I related earlier.

Remember that Ian Bedloe had dropped out of school to help his parents raise the children of his brother, whose death and that of his brother's wife he felt responsible for.

Ian's parents were shocked and resistant when he told them his plan. When they asked him who would help, he told them about the church, the Church of the Second Chance "that believes you have to really do something practical to atone for your, shall we call it, sin.

And if you agree to that," Ian told them, "the church folks will pitch in. His parents were shocked, "Have you fallen into the hands of some sect?" His mother reminds him that her church doesn't ask them to "abandon our entire way of life."

"Well maybe it should have." Ian responds. Then, following Rev. Emmett's instructions, he tells his parents what he had said to his brother before his car hit the wall. In their silence, he left to check on the children. That night, in a dream, his brother came to him, smiling.

"People changed other people's lives every day of the year. There was no call to make such a fuss about it." That's how Anne Tyler ends *Saint Maybe*, her story of Ian Bedloe.

Second chances. If we think hard enough, we see she's right. Every moment and every day is a second chance. Every church on every street should be the Church of the Second Chance.

We are each other's Rev. Emmett. The challenge for each one of us is the same as for that fig tree in the garden and Ian Bedloe waiting at the stop light.

We can't just say, "I'm sorry. God." Forgiveness comes with repentance and reparation.

What are we to do?