

Luke 13:31–35 (NRSV)

At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.’ Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.’ ”

The City that Kills the Prophets

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: February 21, 2016 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Luke 13:31–35

Jerusalem, Jerusalem. Can you hear the anguish? Can you hear the sorrow? Can you hear the disappointment in these words? Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often have I desired to gather your children ... and you were not willing!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! Can you hear the sadness and distress in Jesus' words?

There are several basic ways to read Jesus' lament that more or less define Christianity today. They all hear Jesus' lament as an indictment of the world. Things are not the way they are supposed to be.

Perhaps the most common way of reading Jesus' lament today is say that things used to be right not all that long ago, but recently we have taken a wrong turn. The change in social values has undermined what was once a Christian nation. Jesus laments the loss of better days when good Christian values were the coin of the realm. Of course, this view suffers from a lack of perspective. First of all, Jesus said these words two millennia ago, and he was suggesting that things had been a mess for a very long time. Jesus wasn't harkening to the good old days. The view that things were good just a short while ago is unhinged from reality and from the Biblical witness. Consequently this common view of a recently lost paradise makes up its own stories about Christian reality. It cherry picks a few verses from the Bible sometimes, but largely they are in service of what they already believe. It says that the Bible tells us that the Bible says marriage is supposed to be between one woman and one man ignoring the fact that many Biblical heroes had several wives and concubines. I don't want to spend a lot of time on this view this morning. Suffice it to say that when you get to make up what the Bible says you can end up saying all kinds of things about immigration, about God favoring America and about just about anybody you want. I don't want to spend much time on this view of Christianity, as prevalent as it may be, because it is a silly view. It is just what Jesus had in mind when he cried, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!"

But there are a couple of other views that take Jesus' lament seriously. They begin with observation that we kill the prophets and those who are sent. They take seriously the longstanding brokenness of the human condition. They don't crave a better era a few years ago. They both implicate us in the crucifixion of Jesus, and they see him as one in a long line of prophets that have faced our rejection throughout human history. Both understand why Jesus weeps and cries out in grief and disappointment, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem." And both of these versions of the Gospel meet God's sorrow over our brokenness with God's unimaginable love for us, a desire that all of our Jerusalems would be different from what they are. And both assert that we will continue to reenact our fallen state over and over again. We will continue to kill the prophets. We will continue to cause God to weep in grief. There seems evidence enough to support this view. The Gospel part of these versions of things, the good news part, is that despite our persistent fallenness, our persistent disappointment of God, we are saved, redeemed by God's grace.

These things these two share in common. But then the two readings of the Gospel diverge. In one the only necessary change that we must make is to have faith in this grace. If we believe in Jesus our incessant sinning is simply forgiven. In some tellings of the story, Jesus paid a ransom for us, in other tellings Jesus died in our place, but the ideas are the same. Jesus did for us what we can't do for ourselves and if we but believe then we are the recipients of undeserved grace, even absolution. Nothing else is required.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this version of things cheap grace. He didn't mean that there's another grace that we earn that's expensive. But what he did mean was that God's grace in response to our human fallenness should not fill us with self-satisfaction and cause us to wash our hands and turn our backs on the brokenness of the world.

The other reading of the Gospel starts from the same roots. Jesus weeps for us. God desires different for us. And we will continue to disappoint God because of our human condition. And just as in the other version of the story, by grace God forgives us. Just like in the other story, God wishes us to come to faith. But this time the idea of faith is a little different. This time faith frees us in a different way. When we realize that we cannot be perfect and that God loves us anyway, we are freed from ourselves, and we are freed for others. We are freed to weep for the condition of the world. We are freed to lament, Jerusalem, Jerusalem. We are freed to see God in the suffering around us. We are freed to more deeply connect with creation and its cares.

The first kind of faith says we cannot save ourselves or the world, but that God saves us, so we don't have to worry about anything. Some would even go so far as to say that God smiles on those with this kind of faith. If you have faith, success will follow. So if God isn't smiling on you, well, you get the idea.

The second kind of faith recognizes human limitations, it recognizes human brokenness, it understands that God loves us and the world anyway, and so it ironically frees us to look the condition of the world in the face, to not be overwhelmed by it and to care.

The first kind of faith that turns its back quickly becomes a private matter of belief between me and God. The second kind of faith is known by its actions, by the things it cares about and its acts of discipleship.

This last week these two forms of faith were put vivid display. When asked about Donald Trump's views on illegal immigration, the Pope said, "A person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not the gospel." Trump immediately reacted, Tweeting, "No leader, especially a religious leader, should have the right to question another man's religion or faith."

The Pope and Donald Trump don't just disagree about immigration. In fact, they don't just disagree about the correct Christian view on immigration. The far greater disagreement between them is what makes a Christian a Christian. Trump sees it as so much a private matter that not even the Pope can have an opinion about another man's faith. The Pope sees being a Christian as a matter of holding Christian beliefs and trying to act in accord with them. Trump and the Pope are on different planets on this matter.

My point isn't to so much to take a partisan stand and denounce Donald Trump's politics, though that's tempting. And it's certainly not to belittle Donald Trump, for he is a human being loved by God. But it is to note what happens when religious belief becomes so private a matter that it has no moral accountability.

Again, my point isn't that the Pope is right on immigration and Trump isn't, though I do think that. There are plenty of places where I disagree with Pope and Catholic teachings. The list is very long, indeed.

I'm also not principally saying that more public pronouncement of one's religious perspectives is the better alternative. To make a bad pun, there is plenty of religious pontificating about social issues, much of which creates more heat than light. What I am saying is that religious faith that has no impact on one's life and is completely private is ludicrous. On the other hand, acting out of one's faith is complicated, too. As I noted at the beginning, faith unhinged from the Gospel, faith that we make up and then ascribe to God is incredibly dangerous. The horrific acts offered in God's name every day are legion.

But there's something in Jesus' lament, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often have I desired to gather your children ... and you were not willing!" that cuts against all the nonsense. If I listen to Jesus' lament, it pulls me into places I don't really want to go. It challenges me over and over. It won't let me put my own words on Jesus' lips. It is disruptive. It won't let me get away with making Jesus in my image. It won't let me pretend that I am doing God's bidding when I kill the prophets and stone those who are sent. It won't let me off with another cheap form of grace. Jesus' lament demands our attention, our full attention. And the faith he calls us to stands always in his weeping shadow. Whether we are talking of race or economics, of gender or sexuality, or of violence or poverty, Jesus' lament, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem," reminds us how frequently we try to evade the uncomfortable core of the question, how frequently we try to solve the problem with superficial, hollow and agreeable, easy to swallow antidotes only to make the problem worse, accepting cheap grace that is no grace at all.

When Bonhoeffer wrote about costly grace as the opposite of cheap grace he had in mind the grace that gives us the strength and clarity of sight to see and act in ways that are often difficult, that stretch us, that take us out of our comfort zones. This costly grace means that Jesus didn't just die for us, he also lived for us. He healed the sick and cured the lame; he cavorted with the outcasts and the unclean. He showed us the way. Surely, we will never be perfect. Not even close. But we can do our best to live in the shadow of Jesus' weeping love. We can receive his grace that not only forgives us but also calls us to be his disciples. Amen.