

God is Love [OR It Can't Just Be About Love...Can It?] Luke 13:1-9 and 1 John 4:7-21  
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Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022

♪♪ “There is a longing in our hearts, O Lord, for you to reveal yourself to us.  
There is a longing in our hearts for love, we only find in you, O God.”<sup>1</sup> ♪♪

We are singing this song in Lent in place of the usual Kyrie, a prayer for God's mercy. We sing and claim that God is love. We hear that 'God is love' in scripture like the 1 John reading today. The Psalmist's lips praise God's "steadfast love [as] better than life." God is love. Do we believe it? Is God really love? We say to each other in word and deed, "It can't just be about love." We doubt that God is love. We perform mental gymnastics to explain some of the more troubling parts of the Bible – contorting God's love into strange shapes that none of us would recognize as love. It's a little unclear as to how we benefit from these mind games. In these theologies, God gets set up as unpredictable, angry, and insecure, one who could lash out in condemnation at any moment. "You better watch out" doesn't sound like love to me. It sounds more like Stockholm syndrome when victims develop feelings of affection and trust for their kidnapper.

In a sermon a couple of weeks ago, I said that "the death of Jesus was the logical end of human anger, not God's." This means that the cross holds up a mirror to the violence in us, not in God. More than one of you had questions about that, bringing up the Old Testament and wondering about God's anger and God's love and what you've been taught about it. Stories like the one in our Gospel reading from Luke today are a good way to talk it through. Jesus had been teaching the crowds and the disciples for quite some time before the question about the Galileans was raised. The Galileans, whose blood was defiled by Pilate, were quite possibly known by Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Galilee was not a big place. His statement wasn't an abstraction about somewhere far away. These people were his neighbors who died violently and unexpectedly. In Luke's Gospel, Pilate comes up throughout the story of Jesus (3:1), and at the end he will mix the blood of Jesus the Galilean with the Passover sacrifices. Pilate used the power of government to inflict suffering – NOT the power of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Listen to "There is a Longing" by Anne Quigley's here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gP9BBz6fRkk>

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy L. Williams, Assistant Professor of New Testament, Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX. Commentary on Luke 13:1-9 for <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/third-sunday-in-lent-3/commentary-on-luke-131-9-5>

According to Jesus, neither the Galileans' executions nor the eighteen folks crushed by the Tower of Siloam were punishment for sin. Explanations for suffering are always inadequate but it's interesting how often suffering is attributed to divine retribution, punishment for sin through catastrophe. Jesus rejects the argument that suffering and catastrophe are divine punishment for sin. Jesus said, "No." Yet still, we find it hard to believe that God is love, finding it much easier to believe that God is anger. Let's put a placeholder there for just a moment and talk about people as an example. It's often easier for us to believe that people are mad at us or that we're in trouble – yet one more example of the continuum between adolescents and adults. We get older but don't really change all that much. We're quicker to assume that people are mad at us, or just don't like us, than we are to assume that people love and accept us. Is it possible that we're also quicker to assume God is mad at us than that God loves us, projecting our assumptions onto God? It can't just be about love...can it?

Take notice when Jesus tells a parable in response to a question. Parables are never direct answers. Parables don't offer certainty. Parables invite creativity. In this parable about the fig tree, we can play with who might be the man with the vineyard, the gardener, the tree, the fruit, the manure, or the calendar. Okay, who wants to be the manure? (Sorry, couldn't resist.) Playing with a parable means there can be multiple lessons in any one story. So, if God is love, where is God in the story? The gardener? The fruit? Could Jesus be the tree and Pilate be the vineyard owner? Could God be the calendar in the reference to time? I have my own thoughts about the story but it's helpful for us to be uncomfortable before jumping to quick answers. Parables disrupt our assumptions and invite our curiosity. Could disruption and curiosity be love? It can't just be about love...can it?

In addition to Pilate's appearances throughout the gospel, Luke prioritizes fruit-bearing.<sup>3</sup> In chapter 3, John the Baptist calls everyone to bear fruits worthy of repentance (3:8). In chapter 6, Jesus preaches that good hearts produce good fruit (6:43-45). In chapter 8, he explains that honest and good hearts "bear fruit with patient endurance (8:15)." Before telling the parable about fig trees and fruit bearing, Jesus invites his listeners to repent, in the plural. Meaning that repentance in this story is a group activity. How many of you like homework that

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *ibid.* Dr. Williams highlights these passages in Luke in his commentary.

are group projects? Me neither. Too much unpredictability when a grade is on the line. But here is Jesus, using the plural of repent and assigning a group project. Some Jesus followers took him at his word, named the group project of repentance and called it Lent. Lent can't just be about love...can it?

Repentance means to change our minds, to change our thinking. Changing our thinking does not mean 100% agreement. But putting our minds together, repenting together, can lead to deep discernment of what it means that God is love and THAT repentance, discernment, and love can transform the world. It can't just be about love...can it?

The mystery of God is voluminous, unknowable in its totality. Thank God that Jesus was given as the shorter, Spark Notes version of God.<sup>4</sup> Jesus is the summary of God's love. The Bible stories of Jesus' earliest followers are part of the group project. What is God's love? Jesus. Jesus bridges the gap created by our self-preservation through hoarding prosperity, power, and protection. Self-preservation over and against our neighbors, also known as sin, is the opposite of fruit-bearing and looks nothing like love.

1 John reminds us that Jesus reveals God's love so that we might live. Jesus is called the "atoning sacrifice," but he isn't payment to an angry God or a hungry devil. That's just divine child abuse. It's not love. Oh no, Jesus is not payment. Jesus is a revelation to a world, to a people, to us, that needed to be loved and shown how to love. Taking violence into himself on the cross, transforming death through self-sacrifice, and revealing the depth of divine love, Jesus shows us that God's judgement of the living and the dead clarifies where we fall short in loving God, self, and neighbor. Judgement is neither condemnation nor punishment. Judgement is a call to love, a restoration of love – restoration not retribution.

1 John tells us that there is nothing to fear because there is no punishment – "Perfect love casts out fear." The word "perfect" in 1 John is perhaps better translated as "complete," as in "God's love is made complete in us." Whatever God's reasons are, God, who is love, "...first loved us," and God's love is made complete. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us..."

We love you God. Thank you for loving us first. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Cliff Notes and Spark Notes are similar. They're the easy, incomplete summary of a full book or area of study.