

“Catch Yourself” A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, Year C, February 28, 2016. Bethlehem.

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At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Garry Trompf wrote the book on Melanesian Religions. He says that the underlying theme of Melanesian religions is reciprocity. First he talks about positive reciprocity—the exchange of gifts. New Guinean cultures are filled with occasions for people to share with each other—and to give back to those who have shared with them. Then he talks about negative reciprocity—warfare, payback killings. Enough said. But the third way in which New Guineans maintain the equilibrium of their societies, he says, is **conversation**. Talking about what has happened and why it happened, until people can satisfy themselves; analyzing events until they know they happened for a good reason, or whether something must be done to restore the equilibrium.

I don't think he was saying much about New Guinean societies that isn't also true of our own society, or the society of Galilee in Jesus' time.

Something very bad happens, we're going to talk and talk about it. Until we successfully attribute responsibility to the right forces or people or history or fate or whatever.

A very bad thing happened to some Galileans; the other Galileans were disturbed about it. Of COURSE they would tell Jesus about it. And they would hope he could “shed some light on it.”

They did this to Jesus on other occasions. They wanted him to work out other problems such as taxes, the death of a loved one, why a man would be born blind (how could he be a sinner?), even divide an estate one time.

So, when they told Jesus about the bad situation with Pilate and the Galileans, they just wanted it to make some sense.

Jesus asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?”

Jesus loved to take their concern and redirect it to his concern. He knew, for example, that when people get in these conversations about bad things happening to others, they like to reach a conclusion that makes them feel better about themselves. So he trotted out this hypothetical. “I suppose you think that, God being just, those bad things would not have happened to them unless they deserved it somehow, right?”

Jesus put them in a tight spot. Here they were trying to help God out by justifying God's actions as “Well, they must have deserved it!!” And Jesus, instead of helping them rescue God, made the situation worse, by what he said next:

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.

Whoa. They just wanted to talk about the news until it made better sense. Jesus didn't need to totally disrupt the equilibrium by putting them all in the same doghouse as the people to whom the terrible thing happened. God being fair and just, surely God would not make everyone suffer the same fate!! That would be horrible. It had been a bad idea to mention this to Jesus. He was only making them feel worse.

So, Jesus made them go through it all again. He asked:

Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?

And they started to feel a little better, because now he was talking about people “living in Jerusalem.” They were not Galileans, they were Judeans. You know, Southerners. But then Jesus did the same thing again. He said

No, I tell you, they were not worse; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

The lesson was over. It was a harsh one, but this is what it amounted to. People need to stop justifying themselves by comparing themselves with other people. We are all alike in God’s eyes. No amount of discussion of others is ever going to produce a satisfying conclusion in which we feel good. We all need to repent.

If I went through all my old sermons, I don’t think I would find the word “repent” very often. I don’t use the word freely, which is how Jesus used it. He defined his mission: “I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners to repentance.” And he went into all the region around the Jordan, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” And today, he tells everyone “Unless you all repent, you will all perish.” The parable about the lost sheep concludes “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than in ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

(He was being ironic there talking about “ninety-nine righteous persons”: *As though only one percent of people need to repent!*)

I think the word “repent” has been ruined. The *image* of the word has been ruined. We think of it not as Jesus did, but rather in the same way as those confused people he was talking to. They figured repentance was something for *very big* sinners. The kind of people God would single out for a calamitous punishment. They might have been saved, if they had just repented. Stopped their felonies.

But repentance *as Jesus used it* obviously applies to *absolutely everyone*. “Unless you all repent, you will all likewise perish.” Jesus was not willing to allow people to judge *others* as needing repentance. Jesus wanted everyone to repent of their *own* sins.

HUGE procedural error people make. People think it is all about the sins. Pointing them out in others. Straightening out other people. Ridiculing others for their flaws. Catching other people making mistakes.

All the while, Jesus is looking down on us for *looking down on others!* For catching others in faults. I don’t know if this is exactly a Catch 22, but it is some sort of a catch. I’m in real big danger of it at this very moment, since I’m talking to you about something you might be doing wrong!

Remember the story of the woman “caught” in adultery, in John 8. Don’t get Jesus wrong. He is totally against adultery. But what does the story show about Jesus? He is totally against people “catching” others. “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” Jesus prefers that we “catch *ourselves*.” All that energy that goes into analyzing the faults of others? Jesus would prefer that we use it to figure out the various ways in which we ourselves are ungrateful to God.

Why? Because then he can do something about it, through forgiveness. If we are knuckleheads like the older brother in the story of the prodigal son, we can live our entire lives living in range of God’s love and mercy without ever experiencing it as God’s love and mercy—only as what we deserve for being such good people. Whereas, if we “catch ourselves” when we are eating pig food and realize the goodness of our heavenly Father to us, we can begin to live the altogether different life of the redeemed.

That very different life of the redeemed is what shapes our time together on Sunday morning. You don't come here for me to point out what is wrong with you—or what is wrong with others. You come here to join me in thanking God for loving even us. We come not to justify ourselves, but to say “Lord, have mercy upon us.” We come to the waiting Father, and—Sunday after Sunday—he puts a robe on our shoulders and a ring on our fingers, and welcomes us home.

Amen.