

Reflection for the Third Sunday of Lent

Readings: Exodus 3. 1-8a, 13-15, 1 Corinthians 10. 1-6, 10-12, Luke 13. 1-9

A strange thing about us humans is that, unless we are of the very narcissistic type, we often experience feelings of being inadequate, unworthy of love and happiness. Do you sometimes feel that there is something wrong with you? Well, if that happens to you, then you are to yourself as the owner in today's gospel is to the fig tree – destructive.

What are we judging ourselves against in these moments? What and whose expectations are we carrying in us like the litmus paper to check whether we are good or evil? Do you look for a proof from others that you are good, that you are OK?

The great and very liberating thing is that we are neither good nor bad. Neither OK nor not OK. The events in our lives are not sent by some sort of deity to either punish us or reward us. Instead of looking at ourselves in a judgemental way, we can disregard the judgement and be to ourselves as the gardener from our story is to the fig tree – nourishing and accepting.

Let's read the parable in the following way: the fig tree is us, the owner that wants to cut the tree is us when we fail to love ourselves and when we see ourselves as inadequate and bad, and finally the gardener of the tree is also us – us when we let ourselves be, when we look at ourselves with a loving, nourishing gaze. Please - I am asking you but I also address it to myself - choose to be the gardener to yourself - not the judgemental, loveless owner.

But this is not the whole story of this gospel reading in particular and to spirituality in general – is it? If we cast out the judgement and make a habit of thinking of ourselves with tenderness and love, it is a great first step, but not the whole story. In today's gospel, Jesus warns us that we may perish, and he calls us to repentance. What is this all about? What does he mean by repentance?

I said earlier that we are neither bad nor good, neither OK nor not OK. We do not differ in terms of level of goodness and evil, but we do differ in terms of level of awareness of what we say, what we do, how we treat ourselves and others. Repent means: strive to understand yourself, your actions, see what is behind your anger, your passion, your ignorance. Do not judge yourself when doing that – simply understand. If you understand something, let us say your anger, when you understand the fear behind it, it will not have control over you.

Remember the passage in the gospel, when Jesus on the cross looks at his oppressors and cries out “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34)? They know not what they do. He did not cry out “Poor, miserable sinners, I have mercy for you” No. Let’s be clear - he also did not have to inform God what was happening. He said what he said because he was concerned about those who were killing, destroying, acting out. Wake up, realize you do not know what you are doing. When you realize what you are doing – then the forgiveness will come because you will see through your behaviour and you will see the source of ignorance and suffering in you, in the world, and you will be gentle with yourself and with others. Understanding is forgiveness.

Do not take upon yourself the identity of a sinner. When you do that, you judge yourself and whatever you judge you do not understand. The danger in labeling ourselves as sinners is that we are then addicted to forgiveness that does not come from awareness but from something outside of us. If we expect a person or God to forgive us, we are simply addicted to our idea of that person or God in order to feel good about ourselves. But in fact we as individuals and as a community have the ability to understand and forgive and love. God, who is Love, is within us.

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