

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Luke 13:1-9; Isaiah 55

20 March 2022

From Earning to Receiving

Opening Greeting and Prayer:

Let us pray: God of grace and unmerited mercy, thank you that your forgiveness and freedom are free gifts offered to us, your broken image-bearers, like the rain and our very breath. Empower our resolve as we turn away from temptation that lures us into thinking that we have earned our place in your family or earned your love and acceptance. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Message:

These 9 verses that begin chapter 13 of Luke end a collection of Jesus' teachings that starts at the beginning of chapter 12. Wherever Jesus is in rural Galilee, Luke writes in 12:1 that the crowd has reached numbers in the thousands and become so large that the people have begun trampling each other in their efforts to get near to Jesus. When we begin reading 13:1, we realize that this small group of concerned travelers in the crowd have a particular purpose in reaching Jesus. They want to warn him of Pilate's antagonistic and cruel relationship with the Jewish people in Jerusalem, especially the temple.

We must remember too that by this time in Luke's gospel, Jesus has set his face toward Jerusalem. Jesus's eyes are set on the center of power, at least in Palestine, and he has a very large entourage or group of Galilean pilgrims walking with him. Word seems to have spread throughout the crowd that this seems to be Jesus's endgame, which is probably what leads this

particular group to come and express their concerns about his intentions, especially with the ruthless leaders awaiting him. The Roman governor of Palestine, Pilate, sent Roman troops into the Temple where sacrifices are being offered to slaughter a group of Galilean pilgrims, most likely because of the risk of their gathering in the Temple turning into a riot, depending on what Pilate has been told about them. When the Roman soldiers are finished, the blood of these Galileans runs across the temple courtyard, mixing with the blood of the sacrificial animals and polluting the sacred Temple space. Ironically, the people of Israel had thought that they had returned to true and right worship after the Babylonian exile by rebuilding the temple and the city walls, so what could it mean that enemy forces could enter anytime and disrupt or destroy God's sacred spaces? God did not seem to have any power over these unjust and cruel oppressors. Each time that something like this happened though, the people had to reconsider why God would not or could not intervene in these humiliating circumstances.

While this small group might be warning Jesus that going to Jerusalem is a poor choice because of the powers that be in that city, they also seem to be implying that these Galilean pilgrims' dismal fate is an example of the kind of judgment and suffering that Jesus has been talking about in his teaching just before this. Throughout chapter 12, Jesus has warned the crowds and the disciples that they must pay close attention to the present moment and respond creatively as Jesus has been encouraging them. Jesus is telling them that there will always be another empire with an even larger military and more strategic avarice in achieving its goals for conquering and kingdom-building, so see clearly that no amount of political revolt will achieve the desired end of exile or the establishment of the Jewish nation. Jesus is trying to show them that his going to Jerusalem will accomplish all of this but not in the way that they are expecting.

So, when this small group attempts to use Jesus's teaching to blame these Galilean pilgrims for their tragic fate, Jesus responds with questions that cut to the core of their worldview. Were these other Galileans an example of missing God's purposes or of punishment from God for sin? Is this new group of pilgrims following rabbi Jesus somehow better or more prepared for what is coming in Jerusalem? Jesus says no. Jesus affirms their attempts to interpret the present moment, but he tells them that they must repent as much as any of their neighbors. If they do not turn away from the skewed beliefs or ideas that shape their perception of these moments of violence and suffering, then they will suffer similarly, a cryptic prediction of the destruction of Jerusalem to come in 70 CE by the Roman Empire. This response is Jesus' subtle way of reminding his audience as they journey to the Jewish center of power that those who live by the sword will die by the sword. Jesus will not let the crowds off the hook as if they are incapable of changing their point of view and realizing that better ways are possible.

Jesus then carries this moment of teaching with a parable, a story that will bring clarity for those with ears to hear and confusion for those whose ears are still deaf to the Spirit's calling. A vineyard owner has a fig tree, probably one of many among the grapes because fig trees were good for the growth and development of grapes. This one fig tree, though, has gone three years without producing fruit, which angers the vineyard owner. The owner tells the gardener that the fig tree must be removed, but the gardener argues with the owner that there is still a chance with proper nourishment and care that this tree will produce fruit, so the owner gives the tree one more year. Is this story about Jesus, the gardener, seeking patience from God, the vineyard owner, as judgment looms over God's chosen people? Or is it a story about Jesus, the vineyard-owner, who allows one last chance in his final journey to Jerusalem for the religious and political leaders to respond to his call for peace? No matter how we might interpret it, the gospel writer

seems to think that the fig tree gets cut down in 70 CE after the religious and political leaders of Israel refuse to heed Jesus's warnings.

While our first tendency might be to judge Jesus's contemporaries for giving into the temptation that violence will bring peace or freedom, we must reflect on the American pragmatic assumption that military intervention or really violence of any kind will find its end in peace and security, especially as the United States government supports the Ukrainian military with weapons. It is difficult to see how what was happening in the first century is not happening all over again in the twenty-first century, and your response might be... what else can we do? I wonder if this was what the people told Jesus, too when he tried to convince them otherwise.

But what does all of this have to do with seeking God's ways from earning to receiving. In some ways, we can see this clearly in the story if we step back a little farther from the crowd. The people are not content in Jesus' teaching that God's kingdom is here for all, available to all in repentance and transformation, rather than available to those who secure it through violence, manipulation, or coercion. God welcomes each of us, as Jesus did with his neighbors in the first century, into healing and restoration, the markers of God's renewed family, God's kingdom. More often than not, though, we want to be sure that we have earned our place in God's family as much as we have earned our place in the world. We struggle to understand how God's invitation stands without our efforts like the fig tree that continues to stand without any fruit on it. Maybe the interpretation of today's parable that we are most afraid of is that Jesus is the gardener, defending each person's place in the vineyard in spite of the forces of evil and brokenness that try to convince us and God that we are expendable if we are not productive.

Receiving the grace of God and our neighbors then is the bedrock of community. Another connection between receiving and our story in Luke is that humans, in their brokenness, have

fallen into the temptation that violence is the way of earning our place in the world. We have been taught that violence makes space for us, but the truth is, as much as we may not like to hear it, that our place in this world has already been provided by God, so we don't have to fight, scratch, claw, shoot, bomb, or destroy our way into being. We only need to receive God's gift of abundant life without price or money and sit at God's table as the guests that God has called us to be, welcoming each and every other guest in the same way that we have been welcomed.

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: gracious God, may our rich feast be an open ear to listen. May our rich feast be a song that springs forth from the heart. May our rich feast be a word of praise on our lips. May our rich feast grow as a gift, simple nutrients slowly nourishing the soil, patient as a tree. May we trust that the fruit will come. May we trust that Jesus is providing – the earth, the water, the air, the ear, the heart, the lips, the hands, the tools for the work – and that we are invited to take our place at the table, a table set long before our arrival. In Jesus' name. Amen