

**Preacher:** Ruth Preston Schilk

**Date:** March 7, 2010

**Scriptures:** Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

**Sermon:** *Letting God Out of the Box*

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Buildings fell, tsunami waves crashed in aftershocks. Homes and lives were lost across all economic and religious spectrums. Do you think that because those Haitians or Chileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all the rest of us? No, but unless we repent we will perish just as they did.

How does it sound to ‘update’ Jesus’ words?

In this morning’s scripture from the gospel of Luke, Jesus reminds his listeners, including us, that figuring out who’s the greatest sinner is a waste of time. “Everyone needs to repent,” he warns. And not because if we don’t, we’ll be killed by a falling tower or die in an earthquake or its aftershock. We need to repent, that is

- have a change of heart,
- turn from one’s sins,
- change one’s ways (all meanings of the Greek verb for repent) –

because if we don’t, even though we might live, we’ll be life-less, as good as dead.

Jesus’ call to repentance casts him in the judging spotlight, in the role of someone who points out where we have missed the mark, fallen short, or purposely done things our way.

It can be uncomfortable to be fingered, to be ‘found out,’ to be asked to change or called to correction. In polite company we might dress it in words that we call ‘critiquing’ or giving feedback or ‘constructive criticism.’ In less bridled circumstances ‘criticism’ or condemnation is what is intended and received.

Some people know God only in this way, keeping God in the judge-box, perceiving only disapproval and harshness from God.

James Bryan Smith writes about meeting such a person:

*I was preaching at a church five years after having preached there once before. Because I have a limited repertoire, I was giving a similar message to the one I had given previously. I was hoping that in the years that had passed, the congregation would have experienced a slight case of amnesia. I related to the church that God loves you without condition; Jesus died for all your sins—God has reconciled you to himself; and in Christ you are a new creation. After the service, a large and powerful man came up to me, looked at me and held out an electronic device to me without saying a word. I looked closely at it, and on it was the sermon I had given five years earlier. I immediately assumed he was going to mock me for preaching essentially the same sermon.*

*“I apologize for preaching such a similar sermon—but you have to understand, I only have one sermon, I suppose.”*

*I looked at his face and noticed a tear falling down his cheek.*

*“I didn’t come up to tease you about your sermon being the same, but to thank you. I heard this message five years ago, and it changed my life completely. I grew up in a highly legalistic church, and every week I heard about how God was mad at me, and how I was not good enough. I lived every day in fear of God, and I didn’t love God at all. When I heard your sermon, it melted my heart. I bought the CD and downloaded it, and have listened to it dozens of times, and have given it away to just about everyone I know. I’m a police officer, so I’m not used to being so emotional. I just wanted to thank you for this message.”*

*We gave each other a big bear hug, and he wept. I was overcome by his story and overwhelmed by his emotions. After he walked away, I basked in the glow of knowing that I had actually made a difference in someone's life, and I turned and silently thanked God.*

*This reinforced in my mind just how life-changing this message is about a God who loves us without condition.* [*The Good and Beautiful God: Falling in Love With the God Jesus Knows*, (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2009, pp. 113-114)].

The police officer let go of the lop-sided view of God which he had been holding and which had held *him*. God had been released from the little box, and in the process, so was he. He embraced the truth that God is merciful and loves him.

Scripture abounds with that truth, in both the Older and the New Testaments.

The parable of the barren fig tree in part, speaks of mercy and tenderness, compassion and love: the vineyard owner was impatient and tired of the barrenness of the tree he had planted. For three years it had used the soil nutrients, taken space and sunlight away from the grapevines, and no fruit was forthcoming. “Cut it down.” “The barrenness have may run for three years, but still the worthless tree has its intercessors. ‘Sir, let it alone for this year until I loosen the hard soil around it and put some manure on it.’ It seems that the law that uselessness induces death-- is savingly entangled with a deeper law of [compassionate] grace” [George A. Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973, pp. 109-110)].

But is God's compassionate grace as straightforward as one might think? After all, the parable concludes with “If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” James Bryan Smith goes on to tell what happened after he spoke with the police officer:

*Then I noticed a young woman who was waiting to speak with me, so I stepped to where she was standing and introduced myself. She then said, with a huge smile on her face, “Thank you so much for that sermon. It was very freeing!”*

*The glow returned for a moment, until she went on.*

*“You see,” she said, “I’ve been living with my boyfriend for the past six months, and I was raised in a church that said this was a sin, and I felt really guilty. But this morning you said that God loves us without condition, and that Jesus has forgiven all of our sins, and then I realized that my guilt was unnecessary. Jesus paid it all! So I just wanted to say thank you for such a liberating message.” She shook my hand and started to walk away with a bounce in her step, like a woman who has just been told by her doctor that she is cancer-free.*

*My heart sank.*

*I realized then that simply proclaiming the good news that God loves us no matter what we do is not the whole story [Smith, p. 114].*

Think about what you would have said to this woman if you were Smith?

A few months after their initial conversation, he had the opportunity to talk with her about how important– and good–God’s holiness is. This is what he said:

*I explained to her that God does not condone her sinful actions, but not because God is a prude.*

*“The reason God does not endorse what you’re doing,” I said, “is*

*because you are sacred to God, and your sexuality is sacred to God. God is very 'pro-sex.' After all, it was God's invention! But sexual intercourse is a sacred act of intimacy that is designed to be shared by people who have made the ultimate commitment—the covenant of marriage. Anything less than that cheapens and diminishes sex, and usually leads to a lot of pain and heartache. You are sacred and special. That's why people wait."*

*"I know what you mean," she said. "After a while it seemed he was only interested in me sexually, and not as a person. Our relationship is a mess. What should I do?"*

*"Tell him, no more until you're married."*

*"He'll say it's over."*

*"Then you'll know his true colours, and you'll be better off."*

*The next time I saw her, she told me that she had followed my advice, and as expected, her boyfriend did not like it, and they eventually broke up for good. However, she was smiling. She was now focusing on the sacredness of who she was. Two years later she showed up beaming outside my office. She pointed to a ring on her finger and exclaimed, "I am engaged to the most wonderful guy! He truly respects me. We decided to wait until we're married to have intercourse. Thanks for showing me who I really am" [Smith, pp. 126-127].*

If the policeman's original dominant narrative about God was the angry god who judges harshly, the woman (after she first heard Smith preach) had held the *other* popular narrative about God – the "teddy bear" god who is a cosmic, benevolent spirit who never judges or punishes.

"People tend to hold either one viewpoint of God or the other. On their own, both of viewpoints are wrong" [Smith, p. 115].

“Jesus does not sacrifice holiness for compassion. Jesus’ uniqueness lay precisely in his embodiment of both simultaneously”

[Willard Swartly, *Homosexuality: Biblical Interpretation and Moral Discernment*, (Waterloo: Herald Press, 2003)].

We need to let go of the God of exclusive judgment or exclusive mercy, for God is both. Instead, hold onto God who knows better than *we* do what is for our good, who knows *that’s* a hard thing to do when our arms are full of other stuff (good or bad).

In a sense, “everyday is judgment day” and I would add, everyday is a grace-filled day, for merciful love and judgment are meaningless without each other. We would never know that love unless we knew our need, and we’d never know our true need unless it were pointed out.

The text from Isaiah 55 – that was both read, and its essence enacted for us this morning– invites us to repent of that which doesn’t satisfy (and *can’t* satisfy), so that we can “return to the LORD, that he may have mercy, for he will abundantly pardon” (verse 7).

May we trust the One who invites all who thirst to come to Him, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.