

The Third Sunday of Lent
February 28, 2016

"Grace Happens"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Psalm 63:1-8 ~ Luke 13:1-9

I've had some strange brushes with clowns in my lifetime. I remember once at the circus as a child a clown stooped down to pay special attention to me. He was right in my face. His clothes smelled of cigarette smoke and his voice boomed from somewhere deep behind the makeup. "And what are you up to, little girl?" I did what most healthy children do. I screamed in terror! Eventually I lost my fear of clowns, but one day a few years ago I was driving in Chicago ... feeling a little blue about things happening in our church ... or not happening ... when I saw a clown riding a bus. She waved to me out the window as we waited at a light. And while I'm not usually one of those folks who thinks God has put everybody else in the world to bring messages to me, the thought crossed my mind maybe this was a message from God telling me I was taking everything a lot more seriously than I should. And then, just two weeks after that, as I was leaving a parking lot with some fellow seminarians, a clown drove by us in a car. It wasn't a clown car ... it was a Buick regal. But there was this clown ... curly orange hair sticking out the window, huge red nose, polka dot suit, and a load of balloons in the back for the full effect. And it scared me because nobody else seemed to notice, so I was thought I might be hallucinating or something. But then my classmates reassured me they had seen it, too, so at least it was mass hysteria and not just a personal breakdown.

Soren Kierkegaard tells a parable in which he says the world is like a theater which has caught fire, and a clown runs out on stage to warn the people to flee for their lives. Only, they don't believe him because he is a clown. The more earnestly he pleads with them, the more they just laugh at what he says ... until it is too late.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is Kierkegaard's clown. He is on his way to Jerusalem with the courage of his commitment to endure what will happen there. At this point, the crowds are still following him. He is a draw, an amusement, a distraction from their humdrum lives. They like the way he disses the scribes and Pharisees. They like the healings and the feedings and the way he makes them feel ... included. But for most of them Jesus is really just another sideshow. They are only in it as long as it doesn't cost them anything.

Jesus is trying to warn them, but they are hard of hearing. One fellow with long hair and a goatee takes his pipe from his mouth so he can use it to punctuate his points. "What about those Galileans?" he poses. "You know, those unlucky folks whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices right there in the Temple? Doesn't that pose a theodictic problem for your apologetic hermeneutic? How do you correlate your apocalyptic eschatology with a doctrine of beneficent immanence and special Providence?" You see what's happening? Jesus is talking life and death on his way to the cross ... but they act as if they're sharing a doctrinal seminar on the question of suffering. They dodge the personal by intellectualizing the faith. By keeping Jesus in their heads, they keep him away from their hearts ... or even more importantly, their hands and feet.

We do the same thing! We make Jesus a head trip. We ponder questions, discuss issues, and approach God as if God were something to be analyzed ... as if by categorizing, classifying, and naming them, we can somehow control the deepest mysteries of our being. As Dan Quayle once said, "The mind is a terrible thing!" It's an important tool, but it can also be an artful dodger. We are right to fear an unreasoning orthodoxy which asks us to "check our brains at the door." But we must also fear a cognitive detachment and intellectual avoidance. Faith has its intellectual side, but our minds shouldn't get in the way of our faithfulness to God. We need to wise up!

Jesus will have nothing to do with esoteric reasoning when the world is on fire. He won't let them talk about ideas when he is trying to love people. He asks them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:2-3). I fear our information age has made us callused. What do you do when you read a story in the newspaper about thousands of people being crushed by an earthquake in Asia? What do you do when you see television reports of cars floating down a street in Alabama ... homes sliding down the hillside in California ... trailer homes opened like tin cans by tornadoes in Oklahoma? Do you weep for the people involved? Do you pray for them or do something to help? Do you connect their tragedy with your own mortality? Or do you sigh and turn the page ... maybe flip the remote control to watch a mind-numbing sitcom so you can insulate yourself from the sorrow? No, we can't rescue the whole world from all its griefs, but what happens to our own souls when we become so accustomed to turning our backs on other people's sorrows? What happens when we so regularly intellectualize the struggles of others that we habitually talk about issues rather than people?

Jesus turns the question on the questioners and brings it right home to where they live. "What gives you the luxury to pontificate over the sins of others? Have you forgotten you are mortal, too, and thus also destined to die? *Unless you repent, you will all perish the same way they did.*" Those are strange, uncomfortable words for us to hear from the one who came to tell us of God's love. But then, just when they're feeling the heat of God's judgment ... which they know they deserve and try to dodge precisely by meddling in somebody else's business ... Jesus disarms them with a story.

Once upon a time there was this man who owned a fig tree. It drew water from the earth, soaked up energy from the sun, took in all God's goodness and thrived. But it yielded nothing in return. No buds. No blossoms. No figs. "Cut it down!" this man told his gardener. "It's just wasting space!" That's the judgment we *deserve* when we take all the good things God has given us and give nothing back to God or anybody else. God didn't plant us on this earth just to be pack rats and clothes horses ... but to do something and to do something good. "Cut it down!"

But wait. This isn't a story about God's righteous anger at all of us who lounge around on the Divine welfare rolls telling ourselves that we've earned it. It's a story about a second chance ... a new beginning. "Leave it alone," said the gardener. "Let me throw some manure on it ... dig up the weeds growing all around it ... wait and see if it doesn't come around."

Will Willimon makes an interesting observation about this Greek word *kopron* which Jesus surprisingly uses here ... and only here. In fact, it's the only time the word appears in the entire

New Testament. You see, it's a crude word, not the kind you use in mixed company. I wouldn't even mention it if our Lord himself hadn't used it here, according to Luke. Some versions translate it rather tamely as "fertilizer," but *Miracle Gro* is fertilizer and Jesus wasn't talking about *Miracle Gro*. "Manure" is a little better, but that still doesn't quite communicate as powerfully as ... Maybe "dung" is a little closer, but to be honest, the word Jesus uses here is ... No, I'm not going to say it. But Luke says that Jesus did. Maybe he wanted to shock these folks into listening for a change. Leave it alone says the gardener. I'll throw some.... "manure" on it, pull up the weeds. We'll give it one more chance, wait and see." Funny thing about that nasty stuff ... apparently it grows great figs!

Now, who is Jesus talking about in this story? He's not talking about those mean old Romans or any other government goons. He's not talking about those poor old beggars trying to live off the drip-drop generosity of the occasionally guilty conscience. He's not talking about those sad souls who were victims of Pilate's hostility or what our insurance companies call "acts of God." No, he's still talking to his philosophizing disciples here ... these fair weather followers who like to debate the fate that others suffer ... while they sit sweetly at the feet of Jesus. He's talking about God's own people, Israel. He's talking about his own people, the church. He's talking about this church ... about you and me.

Here we are ... somewhere in history between "Cut it down!" and "Wait and see." Our church is in this time of transition. We have known times of more people, more money, and more programs to enrich our spiritual self-esteem. There was a day when being church was different on this corner. There was a day when it was easier to come here. I'm told there was a day when church was as active on Wednesday nights as it was on Sunday mornings. Church was where young singles met friends and made dates and found mates and had fun. And there was also a time when you had to search far and wide to find women and children who had no home. I'm told in days gone by that you didn't find angry, frightened kids already burned out on life couch surfing week to week. And some people tell me it's a better place now for people whose skin isn't white, but some people tell me it's actually worse. There was a different day, but that day is gone. And in *our* day God has brought a mission field of shattered souls right here to us ... and what will God's people do?

Will First Congregational UCC turn out to be just another dry stick on the desert landscape? Will God's judgment properly, rightly, righteously be "Cut it down! It's just wasting space!" "No wait. Throw some - "manure" - on it. Dig out the weeds. Give it some challenges to rise above. See if it doesn't produce something useful." My friends, this is the moment of God's mercy for us ... a second chance ... a new beginning.

I love the bumper sticker that appeared a few years ago in reply to that vulgar, cynical red neck bumper sticker that we saw for a while on every other pickup truck traveling down the road. You know the one I mean: "'Manure' happens!" But soon we saw this other lovely, hopeful, spiritual response sprinkled here and there like salt ... "Grace happens!" The truth is that the grace often comes when the manure is the deepest, and both happen together.

Funny thing about that. It has been the glory of the church through the ages, that when the manure of human need ... and exclusive bigotry ... and suffering beyond our resources is spread

all around us ... we have budded and blossomed and produced the fruits of righteousness and justice and mercy and grace. But what about now? What now? The gardener says, "Wait and see." Says Willimon:

Like so many parables, this one does not really have an ending. We are the ending of this parable. The parable is being concluded in your church and mine in this blessed time between the first advent and the next. There is still time, thank God. Today's text reminds us that the Lenten call to repentance is not so much a command as a gift, a gift of time to repent.

The world is on fire and the clown is in our face again, trying to warn us to wise up. Do we laugh? Do we run? Or do we repent while there is still time and get down to the bold, bright business of being God's church? May we pray?

Almighty God, teach us to see: in every challenge, an opportunity, in every need a call, in every moment the blessed gift of more time to be your servants on earth. And we will thank you for the fruitful joy your grace produces in this place. Amen.