

## HOW TO THRIVE ON THIS SHIP

Lent 3 Year C

Is. 55:1-9; Ps. 63:1-8; 1 Cor. 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

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Anyone planning to go on a cruise anytime soon? I thought not. It was only about two years ago when we heard and saw on the news the great kerfuffle on a number of cruise ships, and one in particular that had moored at Sydney, just as COVID-19 broke out. Who was responsible for letting people off the boat? People blaming each other for breakdown in procedure and communication. I guess that's all under the bridge now. Now, we're all suffering from the effects of COVID-19 breaking the ranks and despite all our governments' regulations and restriction, the Omicron variant is everywhere now. Not everyone who has been affected by restriction and regulations have handled it in, what we might call, a mature adult fashion.

There is a sense that churches—and by that, I mean, congregations—are a little bit like cruise ships. We often choose the congregation we participate in according to the kind of journey we are looking to experience. Some people are looking for a party ship that will offer them loads of fun and happy experiences, while others are looking more for something that will feed them intellectually, like some kind of study tour. There are also those who just want to enjoy laying on the deck in the sun while someone else peels their grapes and waits on them hand and foot. And, of course, there are varieties in between.

Whatever kind of cruise you are on, ecclesiastically speaking, one thing will remain certain. There are just some people you won't get along with. And inevitably there will be stresses and conflicts.

When it comes to the good ship church, our responses to stressful situations vary widely, from remembering to trust God on the one hand, to taking out our frustrations on other people at the other extreme. What is it like to deal with problems alongside other people in close quarters? As the church, we can answer that question. It's hard. As God's people we are committed to unity in Christ, even when circumstances threaten to tear us apart—disaster hits, disagreements emerge or jealousies flare. The church is not immune to any of the dangers the rest of the world faces.

Jesus brings salvation to us by restoring us to wholeness. This is usually not a solo experience. We are in it together. Restoration happens in the context of the church. How we treat each other in the close confines of the ship we're riding on together is the substance of our witness to the world. Jesus said that people would know we are his followers by the way we love each other. Do we encourage each other with the Scriptures? Do we share our goods with each other? Do we put our own needs aside and work to tolerate each other's foibles?

Jesus is in the midst of a rich time of teaching when we catch up to him in Luke chapter 13. He has just been talking with the crowds about settling disagreements between believers properly. He also told them that his message would create controversy. So it seemed like a good time to ask a tough question or two. Someone in the crowd wondered why some Galileans had to die at the hands of Pilate when they were obviously devout people of God. Was their fate some kind of punishment from God?

Jesus would not be pulled into a discussion of cause and effect; instead he cited another incident where 18 people died in an accident. He then turned the subject to the need for repentance. He would not take the bait to draw any kind of distinction between the good guys and bad guys either. Why don't you stop worrying about who is at fault and focus on your own repentance, he seems to say. Time is running out! If you don't think so, listen to a parable.

The parable is about a fig tree that isn't bearing fruit and the vineyard owner who wants it cut down. Time to make space for a more productive tree. But the gardener still thinks there's a chance, and asks for one more year to make it work. His request is granted, although we never hear whether he was successful or not. Apparently that's not the point. So, what does this passage have to do with the church, you may ask. The discussion addresses the way we form judgments about each other. Why do bad things happen to people of faith? We want to understand how things work, and not suffer the same fate of somebody whose weak faith may have gotten them punished. This is the nitty gritty of our life together as the body of Christ, the church. And I don't have to tell you that it isn't always pretty. Sometimes we take it upon ourselves to judge, and we act as gatekeepers or faith police, protecting the honour of the church.

Just to be clear, Jesus does not buy the popular notion, that because something bad happens to you, you must deserve it one way or another. That connection between suffering and blame was an unfortunate interpretation of the blessings and curses God spelled out in the book of Deuteronomy. Punishment for disobedience made sense. But then all suffering began to be interpreted as punishment, so you must have done something wrong to deserve it. (cf. Job) See the problem? The logic was applied backward, and we still make the same mistake. Got bad news? We might not think that you are to blame, at least not consciously. But then our advice often implies otherwise. Even if it's not your fault, by golly you ought to be able to do something about it to make it better. At least don't let it rub off on me.

If suffering isn't punishment, then why do bad things happen? One commentator calls our thinking the "desire to comfort by explanation."<sup>1</sup> It's not so bad to want an explanation for

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<sup>1</sup> Curry, Michael, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C Volume 2, 2009. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press), p. 93.

unexpected situations. The trouble is when we latch onto the first explanation we come to. Snap judgments and easy assumptions are what get us into trouble.

This is the hard work of community—to deal with the hard questions instead of being lazy and accepting whatever plausible explanation arrives at the door first.

Who doesn't want a quick, simple explanation? Instead, unexamined conclusions to complex matters should be questioned. Love demands the truth, not simple answers. Theological issues that have divided the church in too many cases split congregations because they would not sit down and wrestle with their diverse interpretations of Scripture. Others glossed over the problems and buried them. You can be certain that those problems that were buried alive, will resurface. Better to deal with them, no matter how uncomfortable it feels, than to kick the resentment down the road when our children will be blindsided by it when the next crisis arises.

The hard work of the church is to face the hard questions, to refuse easy answers, to challenge assumptions that may or may not be based in Scripture—or at least may be based on misunderstood Scripture. Another pitfall of the church is to give up on people too quickly. That is the subject of the parable Jesus told about the fig tree.

The owner of the property is not actually irresponsible. Two years after a tree is supposed to start bearing fruit seems reasonable as a cut-off date. But the gardener must have a few more tricks up his sleeve, and he advocates for a little more time.

What would be easier? Cut down the tree and start over. But in the kingdom of God, we don't always do what seems most efficient to a businessman. Mercy, not efficiency, is what we value.

The parallel in the church might look like this. If somebody is driving us crazy with their ideas, or making us look like fools with their antics, it's tempting to cut them loose. But we can be gardeners, advocating for mercy. We can be their patient encouragers, walking alongside them. Take time to understand, and find ourselves growing in the process.

It takes some people longer than others to be restored to faith, to wholeness. Maybe the problem with church is more personal for you, and you're a victim. You've been hurt by a careless remark or even the intentional actions of a fellow church member. The easiest thing to do is leave. Go find another church, or start one of your own. Better the sharks in the sea out there than the other passengers in here.

Digging around a plant and fertilizing it is dirty, sweaty work. So, too, is facing each other with our hurt feelings or diverse opinions, listening to one another and hashing through it. It would be far easier to just split up and start over. But then we would have missed the

deeper joy of forgiveness, the stronger bonds forged through gritted teeth and tears, and finally, hugs and handshakes. Praying for someone you can't stand is what's required of us, and we accept the orders reluctantly. Yet by faith we trust that there will be restoration on the other side. At least we hope there is.

Sometimes there isn't. If the fig tree doesn't bear fruit in another year, it's gone. Jesus is not mincing words about judgment here, the judgment of the only righteous Judge. Don't wait too long to repent, because the day of reckoning will come. Everybody, whether victim of Pilate or victim of an accident, will die. You will die.

Perhaps the message for you this morning, on the third Sunday of Lent, is to quit wasting your time on figuring out who is to blame for what and take a look in the mirror instead. You need to repent as much as the next person. Repentance will lead to your restoration, your salvation. You have to turn away from all the excuses that have kept you from experiencing God's mercy. Could it be that you have been too lazy or too stubborn to admit you need restoring?

There's another potential problem. Maybe you don't like the people here, the ones responsible for helping restore you, so it's tempting to go elsewhere. Maybe that's the best solution for you. God sometimes surprises us by taking us in a new direction.

The trouble is, the people on other ships are sinners too. Sinners are the only option you've got as traveling companions in the faith. So, it's time for all of us sinners to step up and be Jesus' disciples who follow in the way of the cross. Disciples who listen to one another, forgive each other, bear each other's opinions as well as each other's burdens.

The call of the gospel today is to say no to our excuses, our comfortable assumptions, our snap judgments, and shallow theological thinking. We need to do what the gardener does: open ourselves up to future possibility. Set aside our small thinking that insists on explanations and blame, and instead step into the mystery and mercy of God. It is a wide open space, a place of freedom.

God's invitation to salvation is given out of love. God wants to restore us to himself, and to one another, because it is the only way to life. The church is the ship in which God has called us to ride this life out together. It gets messy in the process, it's true. Love is hard work. But what other choice do we have? We can abandon ship, I suppose. But I'd rather deal with the folks in this ship and figure out how love can restore us. Let the sharks circle us in the water. We're in this boat together with the only One who can save us.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.