

## SPG#229, Lent 3C

March 7, 2010 Charles M. Pope

Exodus 3:1-15

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

At the tender age of 62, occasionally I look back to see how God has brought me to this point, to see how my decisions and my responsiveness have played out in the larger call of my whole life. I know that I have been made aware of some lessons learned that I did not intend to learn. And in some cases, I did not know I had learned the lesson until after the fact. I call this lesson deeper and wider. In fact, saying that makes me flashback to my childhood when we sang the jingle in church, “Deep and Wide.” **Deep and wide, deep and wide. There’s a fountain flowing deep and wide. Deep and wide, deep and wide. There’s a fountain flowing deep and wide.**

The most readily seen example of deep and wide in my life is in my reading of the scripture. In my reading of the Word of God in over the last fifteen years or so, in the lectionary readings per Sunday, and in other readings, almost without exception, there has been the invitation to read things over again. And beyond that, there has been the invitation, in any given lectionary reading, to read the scripture that occurs before the reading and after the reading. And there is always the encouragement within study to appreciate the context in which scripture was written, and to appreciate the context in which scripture is read. And so, all of this taken together I will call deeper and wider. And I discern a call of God to an ever wider and deeper truth in the Christian life.

Someone might say, "Well, of course you see deeper and wider now Charles. Because you have grown to the point in years and study to recognize something that has always been there."

I think that is a good point. But again, I would argue that there is a specific call to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century toward a deeper and wider that is unique for all times.

For example, a reflective and provocative question, would the faith you had ten years ago sufficiently equip you to live in these days of natural disasters, climate change, terrorism, and economic recession? Along with the tensions in our society we have had for a while, between women and men, between heterosexual and homosexual, there are newer tensions between terrorists and potential victims. In addition, in the world of opinions, our world has become adversarial. And there are many who look in the face of a neighbor with grinding teeth and hatred because of a difference of opinion. You know that thing where you allow that someone else has a different opinion than you, and you still respect them and love them? Where did that go? And if we need to find it and define it anew, how do we do it? So, along with these tensions and others, there is a certain kind of anxiety that we have never known. And the question for all of us, aimed at our collective heart, Is our faith sufficient to embrace this new day?

Within the Church, in these days, I hear God calling us to expand our hearts and minds as we build the Church of today and tomorrow. Our call is to deeper and wider beyond what I call the "minimalism," that infects the Church as we know it.

Minimalism is a shrinking away from the excitement and the fear of the unknown. It is a retreat into what is seen as predictable and comfortable. It is an acceptance of low expectations and the minimum. Minimalism is contrasted to the ever widening and deepening call of God in our lives. Life can be lived minimally, or expansively.

By the same token, scripture can be read in a minimizing way, or in an expansive way.

For example, the gospel for today is Luke's teaching on the life of repentance and the story of the fig tree. Luke begins the passage by referring to two events, of which we have no other record: (1) an incident where Pontius Pilate executed some people of Galilee and (2) an incident where a tower near the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem fell upon and killed eighteen people. In each of these two occurrences Jesus asks the questions of his listeners and his readers: **Do you think that these who died were worse sinners than those around them?** But then he answers his own question by saying, **No, but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did.**

Then he told them a parable of a fig tree which a man had planted in his vineyard. The tree grew then for three years. One day, as he observed the tree, he noticed that it had no fruit. And he remembered that it had not born fruit in all three years. So he said to his gardener, **Cut it down. Why should it be wasting the soil?** But the gardener said, **Let me work with it for one more year. I will dig around it, and put manure on it. If it bears fruit, well and good. But if it does not, then you can cut it down.**

On one level, this story sounds like Luke teaching us about the judgment of God, that God is always checking on us to see if we are bearing fruit. That it is always in God's prerogative to cut down and eliminate that which is not productive. However, God is patient and merciful, and will allow for the cultivation that may bring forth fruit in good time. I think that there are many in Christendom who read this story in this way. And a significant part of the life of faith is being good enough and productive enough so that God will not cut them down. So that God will not get them for something. So that God will not send them to hell. I would call this a minimizing and constricted interpretation of this parable.

In contrast, if one is willing to read wider and deeper, it becomes apparent that Luke has placed this parable after some graphic imagery in chapter 12 on the judgment of God. Thus the sequence of teachings within this part of Luke is the judgment of God, a call to repentance, and a teaching of the patience of God. Biblical commentator Fred Craddock says that Luke has purposefully placed these teachings in sequence so that the reader encounters the paradoxical nature of the gospel: the judgment of God, the call to repentance, and the patience of God. And I would say this is a deeper and wider way of reading this passage. But this would not occur to the reader who had read only once, or to the reader who had not bothered to read the content around this reading.

Further, Luke indicates that the narrow concerns about who is a worse sinner are fruitless and lead to nothing.

The questions in today's reading about Galileans who were executed and some people in Jerusalem who were killed under a falling tower, these questions are related to a question in John 9 where the disciples asked Jesus, **Who sinned, this man, or his parents that he was born blind?**

However, in our lives, this notion that our lack of success and our losses are due to divine punishment, is pervasive. There are some who say that the devastation in Haiti and Chile is God's judgment on those nations. Such constricted ideas are born within a narrow and shallow interpretation of the scripture. And the truth in life is that sometimes saints suffer and the not so saintly thrive. Jesus himself is the embodiment of the righteous who suffers. In contrast to this minimalist, narrow view Craddock says that, "We all have an obligation to live in penitence and trust before God. And that penitent trust is not to be linked with life's sorrows or life's joys."

During this Lent I would encourage all of us to take stock of how we encounter these days in our lives of faith. If our encounters are governed by convenience, by the habit of hearing the scripture read once a week in church, then we will be susceptible to a minimalist, narrow approach. And given a certain sequence of events, we might be more prone to make quick conclusions about God's favor or disfavor.

There are pitfalls in the Christian life. And this is one of them. Of all the people in the world who committed heinous crimes, how many of them were influenced by such a view? How many heard their parents espouse such a view? Of all people who subscribe to the idea that violence is justified by events, how many were steeped in such a constricted view?

Our call is to deeper and wider of heart and mind and spirit. We must believe that God would reveal so much more to us than we will conceive as possible. We must believe that we are called to repentance, to trust, to patience - to tenderness, to kindness, to understanding, to an expanding heart that loves across all boundaries.

At the same time we must be careful about what we subscribe to on a routine basis. We must be careful that we do not live a constricted life. We must be careful that we do not prevent God's filling our hearts and minds with newness and creativity. I encourage the expansion of hearts and minds toward a future unseen, and yet marvelously anticipated.

Toward a faith for the living of these days. Let go of any constrictions. Let go of self imposed limitations. And then let the God of love fill us with possibility, hope, and excitement. Amen.