

“Ranking Ourselves”

Every preacher, I think, has their own routine when it comes to sermon preparation. One thing that I do before coming up with a theme, or even writing anything down, is to read the text that I will be preaching on out loud. This is my thing. Early in the week, I intentionally close my office door, I grab my Bible and I start reading. And just to give you a visual, I usually walk around the office while I'm doing it. I just read out loud. Sometimes it's with great inflection and enthusiasm. And sometimes it's with a more somber and reserved tone. But one thing that I always do before reading the actual verses that I will be preaching on is to first read a section that proceeds the actual sermon text. This could be anywhere from a few verses, up to an entire chapter, depending on how familiar I am with the content. And I do this because it helps establish context, which is really important when it comes to reading the Bible. What was going on at this particular time? Who was doing the talking? Who was the original audience? Where was it all happening? All of this might seem obvious, but the answers to these questions help form a more complete picture of what's really going on in the sermon text. And a more complete picture is what all of us need before jumping to that all important question of what does the text actually mean for us today?

So this past week, I stuck to the routine. Since we are continuing our Lenten Sermon Series called, *“Lord I'm tempted,”* the text I chose was our gospel reading from Luke, chapter 13. So I grabbed my Bible, closed the door, and chose to start start with the last part of Chapter 12. And it sounded like this:

54 Jesus also said to the crowds, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, ‘A shower is coming.’ And so it happens. 55 And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, ‘There will be scorching heat,’ and it happens.

56 You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

The first thing that came to my mind was wow! This isn't Jesus the mystical friend who lives in the hearts of people's experiences and emotions speaking. This is the hard-core Jesus telling the crowd that they are being ridiculous for failing to see the significance of his words and deeds. He was ushering in a new age. Those in the crowd could certainly see some significant things, he told them, but the stuff he was doing and saying didn't register? His tone really sets the scene here, and our gospel reading for today picks up with Jesus speaking to the same crowd.

And look at what these folks do next. Jesus had just called them hypocrites. And how did some respond? "Excuse me, Jesus? I don't know if you've heard, but Pilate apparently had some Galileans killed when they were trying to offer their sacrifices at the temple."

Now, no doubt whatever happened here was a tragic event. But what was the crowd's motive in bringing this up with Jesus? Were they hoping that he would say that this event was proof that those Galileans were obviously not as good as other people like them? I don't know. But Jesus knew what they were doing. And using that same tone he had already establish with them, he responds with the rhetorical question: *"Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?" No! The same goes for those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them. Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No! But I tell you what: If you don't repent, you will likewise perish."*

Ouch! I mean, Jesus doesn't mix words here. I think if he spoke like this in today's context, a lot of people in the crowd would probably demand his resignation. Many would be offended. But Jesus was speaking to the crowd that day, not to offend, but to set them straight. And it was out of love. There's no ranking of sinners. Things happen and they can be really bad and tragic. But

these events, shadowed by the sin of this broken world, should serve as warnings. Because a day of final judgement is coming. So Jesus issues the call to repent.

Yes, he was first speaking to those in the crowd that day. But now, he speaks those same words to all of us. But the problem is either we don't believe that he's speaking these words to us **or** we kind of believe that he is, but we'd rather hear him say something nice. And if he can't do that, then we'll settle for nothing at all.

I mean think about this. How many of us give in to the temptation of ranking ourselves against others, but still expect Jesus to bless us? We're Christians. We go to church. We volunteer. Sure we gossip, slander, and cut to shreds anyone who disagrees with us, but that's nothing compared to what all the non-Christians do.

And it gets even more serious for many of us. Like those of us who are constantly trying to justify our sinful behavior as "normal" or "just the way things are in our modern society," all while expecting a word of encouragement from Jesus. But what words does he have for us today? "*You hypocrites; repent.*" For trying to rationalize our sin, and giving into the temptation of thinking so highly of ourselves, Jesus doesn't say, "That's so good for you." He calls us out. It's just that we have convinced ourselves that we don't need to listen.

But this is a boat that all of us are in, because we are all hypocrites! So let's be honest here. It's Lent. It's a time of reflection and self examination, so let's just say it like it is. Some of our sins *are* worse than others, proven by how much they hurt other people. Some of our sins are just our little secrets that are only hurting ourselves. Most of our sins we don't remember. Some of our sins we can't forget. But all of them hurt God. And apart from his grace freely given to us through faith in Jesus, we would all be lost forever.

You know, there's this song by Sufjan Stevens, called *John Wayne Gacy Jr.*, that kind of illustrates this very thing about sin in our lives, but in a strange and morbid kind of way. Without saying too much here, the song describes the horrifying details of what was found under the floorboards of Gacy's house. It's a shocking song. But in the last verse, the singer switches to the first person in telling the story. And he tells it like this:

*And in my best behavior
I am really just like him
Look beneath the floorboards
For the secrets I have hid.*

That's a real wake-up call isn't it? There is no ranking of ourselves, even in our best behavior. We all have secrets. But as poetic and thought-provoking as these lyrics are, we have a better wake-up call. And it's a wake-up call spoken directly to us by Christ himself. Yes, his words are sometimes hard for us to hear. But that's usually the time we need to hear them the most.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the others because they suffered? No! But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Repent, Jesus says to you today. Through the faith he gave you, allow him to work through his word to produce a knowledge of whatever it is that is leading you away from him. Stop playing games. Stop insisting that your ways and your desires outrank his. The temptation to justify yourself will always be there—he knows that. But the Father has already punished that sin, and every other sin of the world, in Christ on the cross. Joined to him, you are completely forgiven and redeemed in his blood. He loves you that much.

But still, we live in the tension, don't we? And yet we live in that tension with the very word of God by our side. So when you are tempted to rank yourself a little higher than you know you should, open his word and allow him to speak to you. When you find yourself confused, full of doubt, and maybe ranking yourself a little lower than the redeemed child of God that he says that you are, open his word,

and allow him to speak to you. He's direct and he might call you out. He does that to me every day. But everything he speaks to you and me is holy. Because his words are there as the Scriptures say, so that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and by believing in him, we may have life in his name. **Amen.**