

Third Sunday in Lent
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
St. Francisville, LA
28 February 2016

Luke 13:1-9

I recently saw a video of a young boy who got lost in a zoo and somehow managed to enter the cage of a huge gorilla. In the video, the boy is seen playing with the 700 pound Gorilla, walking about without a care in the world, until a zoo keeper was able to distract the gorilla with food, while another keeper removed the child. The boy never cried and never knew that he was lost and in terrible danger. To him, there had been no problem. He was oblivious to the phenomenal danger he was in. He was unaware that this same gorilla had attacked an attendant weeks before and had almost killed him.

This is our problem: We don't know we are lost and we don't know the terrible danger we are in. Even though Jesus invites us today to repentance, we can't even begin to imagine how to do this, because we don't believe we are lost. We don't know how precarious our condition is. Like children in a candy store, we are so consumed with all the candy our culture offers us, that we forget that we are at risk. The irony in our lives is that even though we don't know we are lost, we know plenty of people who are lost. We know people who are not measuring up, those sinners who deserve their lot in life, those people who deserve to be judged, punished, and exiled from our communities. Each one of us can point to someone like this. We see their suffering and their anguish and many of us feel superior to them. This is the case Jesus' hearers are dealing with today. They believe the Galileans who were killed by Pilate somehow are bigger sinners than they are, and their death is the penalty for their sin. These revolutionaries deserved their lot in life. Jesus opposes this line of thinking. He says to them, "You are no better! If you don't repent you will face the same fate!" Jesus then brings up the case of a natural disaster. A tower has fallen in Sidon and 18 people were killed. Jesus tells the listeners, "If you believe that they were killed in this accident because they were somehow bigger sinners than you are, you are mistaken. You are just as much sinners as they were."

The apostle Paul states it this way, "We all have sinned and fallen short of the Grace of God". Paul knew what was expected of him as a Christian, but he also knew that no matter how hard he tried, his attention was focused on something else. He once said in frustration, "It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love to do God's will... but there is something else deep within me, in my lower nature, that is at war with my mind and wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. In my mind, I want to be God's willing servant, but instead I find myself enslaved to sin... Oh, what a terrible predicament I'm in! Who will free me

from this slavery to sin? Thank God! It has already been done by Jesus Christ our Lord. He has set me free! (Romans 7, paraphrase).

Christ has done it for us. He has set us free, and all we need to do now is repent and avail ourselves of that freedom. And you may ask, but how? How do we repent? Well, let me answer this question by introducing you to my home town in Colombia. Ituango, was completely isolated for some time, but when I was a child a road was cut through the wilderness to reach it. The town now had one road leading into it, and thus, only one road leading out. If someone would travel from the city of Medellin on the unpaved road for six to eight hours, he or she would arrive at Ituango. If that person wanted to return to Medellin, there was only one way out, and this was by turning around. Each of us, by birth, arrives in a town called Sin. As in Ituango, there is only one way out-- a road built by God himself, through the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. But, in order to take that road, one must first turn around. That turning around is what we call repentance, and without it, there's no way out of the town we call sin.

How do we do this turn around? First, we acknowledge that we have sinned and that our lives have become unmanageable because of our sin. We are wired to take care of ourselves first, to take what we want, to do as we see fit, to take credit for everything we do, and to cover up our imperfections, like the little girl who once said, "To err is human, but to admit it is just plain stupid!" We must acknowledge our predisposition for self-directed lifestyles and we must ask God to help us produce the fruit he expects. Acknowledgment is the first step to change. We admit our wrongs to God and we ask him to transform our lives and to soften our hearts. We acknowledge with St. Augustine of Hippo that "Whatever we are, we are not what we ought to be." The word used for repentance in the New Testament is often used for "Transformation". And it is a continual action. It is a process and not just an event. Rather than saying repent and turn around, we in fact should be saying "Continue repenting, and continue turning around in the right direction". We must adopt a repentant lifestyle by acknowledging our shortcoming and failures every day and by asking God's forgiveness. And he will forgive us. He knows that we are lost, but the good news of the Gospel is that Christ came into the world to "save the lost" (Luke 19:10). He is the Good Shepherd who rejoices when he finds his "lost sheep," his "lost coin", and his "lost son" (Luke 15).

There is a second step. We actually have to walk in the right direction. Acknowledging our sin is only half the battle, the other half is amendment of life. We actually have to walk in the right direction. If our problem is that our lives are so-self directed that we fail to love others the way God wants us to love them, then what we must do is actually begin to love others. If our problem is that our addictions have separated us from our family and friends, then we must do everything we can with God's help to stop our addictions. If we have a problem being faithful in our marriage, then

what we must do is to stop being unfaithful. The only way we are going to produce fruit, is by actually doing the work required to produce this fruit.

This is as true for us individually as it is true for us corporately as a nation. I believe that we must repent as a nation for the way in which we treat God and each other every day. Can you imagine what would happen if politicians everywhere publicly acknowledged their sin, repented and asked for God's forgiveness? If the media acknowledged that it often places profits above the dignity and worth of human beings? If Wall-Street acknowledged and repented of all the machinations and back-room deals that create so much pain and suffering in our nation? Can you imagine what would happen if as a Nation we stopped for a moment, realized that we are lost, and acknowledged that only God can lead us the rest of the way? Let me finish with the words of President Lincoln, at the institution of a national day of Thanksgiving on October 3rd, 1863,

“It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God; to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon; and to recognize the sublime truth, announced in the Holy Scriptures and proven by all history, that those nations are blessed whose God is the Lord... We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven. We have been preserved, the many years, in peace and prosperity. We have grown in numbers, wealth and power, as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to God that made us. It behooves us, then to humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness.”

I pray that we continue to humble ourselves before the Lord during this Lenten season, as we rejoice in the fact that once we were lost, but now we have been found. Amen!