

Lent 3C'19

24 March 2019

I Cor. 10.1-13; Lk.13.1-9

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

North Little Rock, Arkansas

The Rev. Carey Stone

Laughter does the heart good like a medicine: but a broken spirit, dries the bones: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. – From Proverbs 17.22

A Catholic priest, a Methodist pastor, a Baptist Associate pastor, a Lutheran pastor, and an Episcopal priest were all sitting at a table at an ecumenical conference for the purpose of building unity between the different denominations. On the very first day of the three-day conference, in order to build trust, each was supposed to share with those at their table what some of their worst failings were. They were reminded that this would be strictly confidential so everyone could speak more freely.

The Catholic priest went first and confesses that he just doesn't pray. He felt embarrassed and guilty and added, *"thank God this is confidential, I would be horrified if anyone knew!"*

The Methodist pastor went next and said, *"my sin is even more embarrassing than that, I hate to admit it but I never fully pay my pledge to the church, thank God this is confidential!"*

The Baptist Associate pastor went next, *"Oh brothers, my sin is far worse. I teach Old testament studies at the local college and I've been too busy grading papers on Sunday night to go to church. I've been telling the senior pastor that I was sick*

and unable to go. I don't know what would happen if he ever found out the truth, but I do feel better being able to tell you brothers this in confidence."

Next it was the Lutheran pastors turn and he said that his sin was "*far, far, worse than anyone else's*" and that he felt "*much more embarrassed*" than any of the others. He then admitted that he had been going to the horse track on Saturdays and gambling, and had lost quite a bit of money. He said, "*I am covered in shame, but thank God this is confidential!*"

The Episcopal priest still hadn't taken their turn and was sitting there in silence, until one of the group said, "Father, what about you?" The priest said, "*Oh brothers, my sin is the worst of all...I just can't keep a secret!*"¹ Well, it's good to laugh, isn't it?

In the world and in our nation, there seems to be more division than ever before, and a gloominess, and a heaviness *hangs over us much of the time – and that leads to being* 'overly serious' and 'concerned' most of the time. This overly serious attitude tends to paralyze rather than energize; and as we all know; religion can throw its two cents worth in and can be deadly serious to a fault.

¹ Martin, James, SJ, *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life*, (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, 2011) p.144

Groucho Marx was reportedly in a hotel lobby one day when suddenly a priest wearing his clerical collar, rushed over to see the great film comedian. He blurted out, “*Thank you, Groucho, for bringing so much joy and laughter into people’s lives!*” “*Thank you,*” Groucho replied, “*for taking so much joy and laughter out of them.*”² Pop star, Billy Joel, in his song, “*Only the Good Die Young*” echoes a similar sentiment when he sings, “*I’d rather laugh with the sinners, than cry with the saints...*”

Thankfully, not all religious people and priests are that way, in fact some of them are spiritual at their very core but also have a great sense of humor. One such priest is Fr. Thomas Keating; a Cistercian monk and the founder of the modern-day Centering Prayer movement tells a Lenten story about a young monk who was suffering from a ‘terminal case of seriousness!’ He was *serious* about fasting from food during Lent. He prepared by figuring out the fewest number of calories it would take for him to survive. He also looked forward to the purity he would achieve and how much he would “out-fast” his brothers in the monastery. Just before Lent he made an appointment with the Abbot, the head of the monastery, to tell him about his great plan for Lent. The wise Abbott listened closely and after the young monk *had finished, he sat silently for a couple of minutes. Then the*

² Ibid, pp.193-4

Abbott said, “Son, fasting is not about achievement, it’s not about pride. This Lent, I wish for you to eat all of your regular meals but in addition, I want for you to eat at least one chocolate bar each day.” Rather than giving up chocolate for Lent, the Abbot sought to cure him of “terminal seriousness” and from his joyless ‘*brownie point system*’ in relating to God. This Lent why not go and eat some chocolate but give up our ‘terminal seriousness.’ Too much chocolate in some cases could be fatal, but being overly serious just might get the job done a whole lot quicker! This life is meant for joy!

We’ve probably all seen the bumper sticker that says (and I am going to use a G-rated version) “Defecation Happens!” There are times when it does seem that life is defecating on us. It is in times like these that we need to remember the parable of the fig tree from today’s gospel, and to realize that ‘defecation makes great manure, and manure makes great fertilizer, its filled with nitrogen, and phosphates that helps things grow! When life gives us lemons, we can choose to make lemonade, and when life gives us defecation, we can choose to make fertilizer!

We have a choice in these times, we can walk around under a cloud of seriousness and sling the defecation all around, or we can joyfully place the fertilizer at the roots of the tree, where it can actually do a lot of good!

The gardener in the parable is filled with faith and hope, and believes that the tree doesn't need to be cut down. He believes in the power of nourishment to help things grow. He understands that by creating the right environment and by providing the right ingredients, dying things can be brought back to life! And his attitude is not that things are terrible, even though the owner of the vineyard has threatened to cut the fruitless tree down.

The gardener's response is filled with joy and spiced with a healthy dose of humor when he says: "*Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.*" His faith-filled response with an added chuckle, sounds very hopeful to me.

Dear ones of St. Luke's, grab your sacks and come with me, we have some fertilizer to spread! Amen!