

Luke 13:31-35

Obstacles to Grace©
February 24, 2013

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At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”’

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”’ (NRSV)

Sermon

In this second Sunday in Lent, we see Jesus in Galilee, but making his way toward Jerusalem ... the place where the Lord of grace will give everything he has so that grace might be poured out for all who would receive it.

He certainly had obstacles in the way of that grace, didn't he? Everywhere he turned, it seemed, the Pharisees and the Chief Priests – the temple leaders tried to stop him. They accused him of blasphemy, of working on the Sabbath, of being a false prophet.

We are so often reading about those Jewish leaders throwing obstacles in Jesus' way.

Yet, here, in this passage, we get a new picture, at least for a small group of Pharisees. Luke tells us some Pharisees actually came to warn Jesus that he should get out of the region – flee for his life – because King Herod wanted to kill him.

Herod had been the one to stop Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist from preaching. He had John beheaded. And now there was some rumors that Jesus was John, come back to life, threatening his power again.

As much as we hear of negative things about the Pharisees – those strict keepers of the Law of Moses – it seems that not all of them were against Jesus. In fact, there are a few other places in the gospels that indicate that there were some who supported him.

In the third chapter of John, we read that a Pharisee named Nicodemus came to Jesus, asking questions. He wanted to know more about what Jesus was teaching, and how he could inherit eternal life, but he was afraid to publicly ask, so he came to Jesus at night.

He was the one who later would speak out for Jesus at the trial before the Sanhedrin – that council of temple leaders that included Pharisees (John 7:50). Nicodemus, the Pharisee, would even bring oils to anoint the dead body of Jesus before his burial (John 19:39).

Yet, even with this warning from the Pharisees, Jesus would not allow this threat to be an obstacle to his ministry. He was going to continue healing and casting out demons until his goal was reached.

He called it “the third day.” We Easter people – those of us who know that on the third day Jesus rose from the dead – have a glimpse into just what that goal was. Of course, he was headed to Jerusalem, and to the cross.

I love the way Jesus, even knowing he would be the victim of humiliation and pain and a horrible death, he calls Herod – the king – a fox!

“Go tell that fox ...” he says. A fox, of course, is sly and has a reputation for sneaking around on its prey. Jesus was so strong and so determined to accomplish what he was sent to do that he was not afraid of Herod the fox, nor was he afraid for them to send that message back.

I think about how Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18 in regards to the cross. *“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

Christ Crucified Is God’s Power and Wisdom! Do you see how Jesus – who looks weak on the cross – was the strong one all a long. And even when Jesus was threatened by the king of that land, he did not allow it to stop him. He remained a gentle healer, a loving forgiver, a strong deliverer – a focused Savior.

But even in his strength, Jesus shows such deep emotion that some might call it weakness. He is overcome with sorrow over the rejection of Jerusalem. He has come to give grace. He has come to bring salvation to the world.

He desires, with all his being, that his people will recognize what he is about and that they will receive him as the Messiah of God.

And here is one of those beautiful places where we have a metaphor for God that is not masculine, but feminine.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!”

A mother hen? Not a lion, or a bear or some fierce male animal that would fight and destroy. A mother hen.

Of course, growing up in the country, I've seen some mighty scary mother hens. In fact, I was afraid to go into the chicken coupe to when there were chicks there. The roosters were scary, but those mother hens were not anything to contend with.

Yet, there is something gentle and loving and tender about this image, isn't there? A mother hen spreading her wings out and gathering her chicks under them for protection and nurturing.

And this is the image Jesus chose for his work, his longing for Jerusalem. And he sadly says – “And you were not willing.”

But, friends, if we sit here 2000 years from this incident and only look at it from a distance, thinking how sad it was that Jerusalem (which stood for all of Israel) did not accept the grace Jesus offered, then we are sorely mistaken.

Because the Scripture message speaks out and extends into the centuries and hits us right here where we are today. How open are we in this 21st century to be completely willing to accept this grace, this salvation we are given?

I sometimes wonder how our “enlightenment” and all our education has effected what we believe? We Presbyterians do hold education in very high esteem. And we certainly think that thinking theologically is important. That is, thinking through interpretations and contexts and history with the Scriptures. I certainly think it is important.

Yet, sometimes, I wonder if all of that learning becomes an obstacle for having a faith that is full of wonder with a certain abandonment in our trust in God.

And if we say there are not obstacles to our believing, then why is it so difficult to share our faith with others? Why do we have trouble really giving ourselves to this Lord of grace?

What are our obstacles today? Is it skepticism? Is it fear ... a fear that what we want to be true might not be? Is it self-pride or self-dependence, instead of needing a Savior?

On this second Sunday in Lent, I encourage, not just you, but myself as well, to reflect on our faith. Is there any place where we have doubt? Is there any part of ourselves that we have not opened up and given over to God? Is there any lack of trust, any obstacle that keeps us from fully knowing that amazing grace that was provided for us by Jesus?

When I think in this way and I search myself deeply, I know that I am not always bent toward allowing God to do as that hymn says, “melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.”

Instead, I am sometimes more stiff and determined that I can “do it myself.”

I believe that, just as Jesus wept and lamented over the people that day, he still sometimes does, over us.

And what about the many, many people who absolutely refuse to allow him in? I am not being judgmental of those who have not accepted Christ, but I am sad about it because I do believe that God sent Jesus to show us God's love – that love and protection, like a mother hen.

I do believe that the Incarnation is true – that in Jesus, God came to earth so that we might be saved from sin and death and that we might have life in an eternal dwelling with him.

I believe that what Jesus said to Nicodemus, in John 3:16, still for us today – that “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

And so, today, I ask you to take a moment for silent reflection. Ask yourself if there are any obstacles in the way of your receiving God's loving grace, given to you through Jesus, the Christ.

If there is any weak area in your acceptance; in your faith; in fully giving yourself to him ... I invite you to lift that up to God in this quiet moment and to ask him to remove all obstacles.

Silent Meditation
Prayer

“Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed,” hymn #78. Please remain seated as we sing this prayer.