

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
JUDGEMENT OR MERCY?
Luke 13:1-9
March 7, 2010
9:15 & 11:00 A.M. SERVICES**

God sometimes extends mercy to others through us. We are responsible for giving second chances to other people, and we are responsible for giving them what they need to grow. God works both in us and through us.

Without growth, there is no life. This has significance relevance for our criminal justice system. Policies of zero tolerance and life sentences have filled our prisons but failed to change our society. Only a combination of punishment and rehabilitation is humane. Theologically, judgment *and* mercy are God's way of dealing with sin.

Followers of Jesus must possess both the strong hand of judgment and the gentle touch of mercy. We are obligated to maintain order as well as restore relationships.

Many people only think of God as a source of either judgment or mercy. We fear God's judgment, and we hope to receive God's mercy. Most of the time, God relates to us in more complex ways. It isn't always a matter of judgment or mercy. Sometimes we experience God's judgment and mercy in the same experience. This is the point of today's lesson from Luke's Gospel.

Some people tell Jesus about the time when Pontius Pilate slaughtered some Galileans while they were offering sacrifices in the temple. We don't know the details of this event. Jesus asks the people if they think the Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans because this happened. Then Jesus refers to another incident, one in which eighteen people were killed in the collapse of a tower. Was it because the eighteen were worse sinners than other people? The background of this exchange was the general belief in a one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering. Anyone who suffered, many thought, was being punished for sin. Jesus

attempted to correct the people's thinking, indicating that suffering is not always a result of sin.

Then Jesus told a parable about a fig tree. For three years the tree had produced no figs. The vineyard owner wanted it cut down, saying, "***Why should it use up the ground?***" He called for judgment. The vinedresser, however, asked that the fig tree be shown a bit of mercy. "***Let me work with it and see if it will not produce fruit next year. If it does not, then you can cut it down.***" It was a case of judgment and mercy both being involved. Jesus seemed to be saying that God's judgment does not destroy God's mercy, nor does God's mercy bring an end to God's judgment. We may experience God's judgment and still be given a second chance.

John Henry Newman was a nineteenth Anglican cleric who converted to Catholicism where he became a prominent cardinal and scholar. He claimed that "**growth is the only evidence for life.**" Is this true? It is true in nature. Everything that is not growing is dying. How convenient it would be if there was a middle ground, so that when your lawn or garden is exactly as you want it to be you could "**freeze frame**" it and have it remain that way forever. Like the rest of nature, however, it is either growing or dying.

Growth is not just for plants and animals. Growth is certainly a part of being human, and growth is intended to be a lifelong process. There are many kinds of growth, of course. We are both creatures of nature and persons in the image of God. When we stop growing, in any area of life, some part of us begins to die. It is unfortunate, but many adults don't think that growth is relevant to their time of life. When we have completed our formal education, when we have chosen an occupation, when we have made decisions about family life, we may assume we have finished growing. When we reach this point, whenever it is, we start maintaining some *status quo* existence or we start dying. Dying is a process that can go on for many years. A decision to stop growing is a sin against creation and a sin against life.

Haven't you known people who never stopped growing? Perhaps you have known many such people. Reaching what some call maturity, these people kept growing and changing. Maturity is something we grow into but need never finish. **Let's look at still-growing individuals.**

First, still-growing people are confident in who they are. They are still growing in self-knowledge. They know themselves and accept themselves, warts and all. Most of us are still too busy trying to prove ourselves, trying to impress the world that we have value and worth, worrying about what people think of us. Some people never learn who they are, and never accept themselves as a child of God. How sad, if we reach the twilight years with the inner restlessness still unresolved. But how beautiful to have embraced ourselves as who we are, and to have given up wishing to be somebody else. Truly beautiful people are people who have accepted themselves.

Second, still-growing people are unafraid. We spend so much of our lives in fear. We begin with a fear of falling, or a fear of being abandoned, or a fear of the dark. We live with the fear of failure, or the fear of rejection, or the fear of dying. It is said that all fears can be reduced to two: first, the fear of losing something we have; two, the fear of not getting something we want. The Bible gives us the antidote to fear. It is not courage. It is not even faith. It is love. ***“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.” (1 Jn 4:18)*** You are a child of God, who loves you unconditionally.

Third, still-growing people know what matters. Also, they know what does not matter! Most of us have official values that are commendable. At the theoretical level, most of us have it together. But in our daily lives, in the small things that make up living, we tend to have trouble. We say with St. Paul: ***“The good I would do I do not do, and the evil that I would not do, I do.” (Ro 7:19)*** Still-growing people do not make mountains out of mole hills. They do not waste their time and limited resources on secondary concerns. They have the serenity to accept what cannot be changed.

Growth, especially spiritual growth, is slow. It is gradual. Cardinal Newman, who said **“growth is the only evidence of life”** understood this. He wrote: **“Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom; / Lead thou me on! / The night is dark, and I am far from home; / Lead thou me on! / Keep thou my feet: I do not ask to see / The distant scene; / one step enough for me.”**

God’s judgment and mercy are active agents in our growth as persons created in God’s image. Mercy is like the rainbow in the sky. It never glimmers in the bright sky or glistens in the dark night. The rainbow only appears in the clouds after the storm. Mercy comes to us in the clouds of judgment after we have struggled with remorse. Mercy is not a reward for repentance but the gift of God to the contrite heart.

Justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin but the distance between them is seldom paper thin. If you are ready for the drama of life involving both God's judgment and mercy, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.