

A CHANCE FOR A LIFETIME

Our theme for Lent is “Holding on, letting go.”

Today’s passages give us some more insight into what to hold onto, and what to release,.....and how repentance plays a part in all this.

The Luke text begins with people upset about an incident where Galileans were killed by the Romans. Jesus contrasts that incident to another tragedy where a group of Roman sympathizers were killed when a tower they were building for the Romans fell on them.

The contrast is that the crowd was glad and thought it was divine “Justice” when the Roman sympathizers died in an accident, but they were perturbed when those, on their side, were needlessly killed in the temple.

Jesus was trying to show that We should NOT judge by outward standards, assumptions and appearances,... AND to not think there are hidden meanings and values in calamities.

It is tempting to believe that people get what they deserve – both good and bad. Affluent people tend to believe that they deserve their good fortune because of their diligent work and prudent investments. Yet, I know many poor people who work just as hard or harder as rich people.

This distorted judging comes in all kinds of flavours, sometimes it seems innocent, yet it is still destructive.

For example, in another church, a few years ago, a couple got up in church and shared that they were in a terrible multi-vehicle accident that happened because of dense fog. Twenty people died in that blind highway collision.

They thanked God that they were Christians, and that was why they were spared by God.

That comment passed a brutal judgment on all the others who suffered or died in that tragedy.

It is good to thank God for being alive. It is wrong and destructive to assume others are cursed or condemned by God.

More recently, we heard judging comments about the catastrophe in Haiti, asserting they deserved the earthquake.

People and governments have judged and abused Haiti for a long time.

Nobody deserves a earthquake, and God does NOT work that way, ... but we seem to want God to be on our side.

Lest we forget, Isaiah reminds us that God’s ways are not our ways.

A few comments on judging, because it is an oversimplification and missing the point to simply state, “DO NOT Judge.”

In order to survive, we have to evaluate a situation; we have to judge.

In certain situations, we need to judge, such as, is my car durable enough to make a long trip? Do I have enough gas to get there?

When I played hockey, I had to judge a situation and people all the time: I'd pass judgement on a goalie such as he baits a shot on the glove side.... or I would often judge:..... .. If I check that big guy, can I skate fast enough to get away from him?

Sometimes good judgement comes in handy,.....including selecting good investments or..... picking a future spouses for our children.

Honestly, I think parents should go back to picking life partners for their kids, but that's another story, and not for this sermon.

That aside,another example of appropriate judging is holding our politicians accountable. In a democracy, we are suppose to judge our leaders,..... in regards to their performance as leaders.

I think we do know about the other end of the judging spectrum– known as pigeon-holing people or bigotry or sexism or racism and so forth.

It is the grey area in the middle that stumps us, especially when using stereotypes seems to explain things to make us feel good or justified.

When countries go to war, they quickly devalue the enemy into bad guys.... worthy of being killed. We've heard over and over again about the wicked Taliban, and how they abuse women.

That excuse is an extreme oversimplification. There is much more going on, including economic exploitation, yet.... we can sleep better knowing our tax money is killing bad people.

Israel has successfully associated Palestinians with terrorism in people's mind set, to the point that we take it for granted.

Another example: there were lots of people in Vancouver, during the Olympics, trying to bring a social justice message to light, such as the forced relocation of the homeless people to get them out of sight of the tourists. All protestors were labelled Anarchists, a handful may have been. Even so, ALL were grouped together and given that derogatory label, and thus dismissed. Good messages were never heard.

We tend to like to group people; pre-judging seems to make life easier.

In more subtle cases: we judge people by the way they look, where they are from, their job, the way they talk or by the toys they have.

And, exposing this level of judging... makes us all feel a bit uncomfortable,..... because we all do it, and I include myself, too.

A low income person is criticized for spending money for a plasma TV, but a sports hero who drives a \$400,000 Lamborgini Diablo is envied. ?

The ambiguous, yet clearly understood "THEY" is often used in this level of judging:

"They" are like that, you know.

"They" are from that family.

They are from Hague or Warman ??? They comments often beckon an affirming nod, that can cut deeply.

I have my prejudices, too. I've made assumptions, and I have bought things for the wrong reason.....
..... and what is the source of this. .????

We are told not to prejudge / NOT to devalue people and not to stereotype. We tell our children NOT to such things,..... Yet...

.... what are we teaching our children???

I suspect, if my behaviour is any indication, that we parents reprimand our children when they devalue others, or we tell them, "DON'T be like him or her..... or Don't play with guns or don't waste all your time playing video games..... or Just because she can do it doesn't mean you should"..... and so on.

Parenting is hard work, and we parents try very hard to be good parents, YET..... sometimes we err by sending our children to the very place we tell them not to enter.

Judging is limiting someone else; it often is putting someone down, and the negative messages of "don't do this or that" ...we give to our children can have the same effect.

Living in the light doesn't happen by cursing the dark.

From Isaiah:

"...you that have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good and delight yourselves in rich food.

...listen so that you may live.... and on it goes.

In verse 6, the reader is encouraged to seek God / God's ways.... and it notes that God's thoughts and ways are much higher, loftier and grander than ours, BUT that is our goal / the destiny of our reach.

Encouragement: seek first the kingdom of God.... Enjoy / engage... live in the light – the Bible is full of wonderful images – pictures to inspire us.

Yes, the Bible also presents the negative things to avoid, yet... it is the positive images that inspire, such as the lion and the lamb together.... that give us hope... hope that enables change.

Positive reinforcement works so much better, for all of us.

Isaiah leads us to God's way by saying "Come find enjoyment and fulfilment – have your heart's desire – buy without money. There is abundance in God's domain. There is richness, instead of depravity.

There is joy instead of fear and despair – inclusion, instead of segregation – acceptance instead of rejection – grace..... instead of judgment.

YET,..... Even so, as Jesus emphasizes..... this new way / God's way requires a change of direction / a change of thinking and being – And, this change is called Repentance.

Repentance is not begging for forgiveness to avoid punishment.
Repentance, requires the help of God... and it is choosing a radical change of direction.
Repentance is turning to the light / to God's way / to the positive.

In the Luke text, Jesus uses a parable to explain this process.
A man had a an apple tree planted in his garden, and he came looking for fruit on it and found none.
So, he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this apple tree, and still I find NONE.
Cut it down? Why should it be wasting the soil?

So far, this sounds harsh, but..... the story isn't over.

The gardener replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I cultivate it and nourish it.” He confidently added, “if it bears fruit next year, well and good, but if not, you can cut it down.”

..... a little nourishment can make a huge difference.

I don't thinkBerating and punishing the apple tree will make it grew fruit, but cultivating and feeding it will.

I believe this is true with our children..... and with each other..... and with ourselves.

Let us model the desired behaviour for our children.
Let us speak highly of others, especially those we know very little about... Let us assume the best!

Let us feed our children with praise, and ennoble them with assurances so that they may risk and learn about other people and other cultures.

We want our youth to come to church, so let us go to church and let us listen to the vision that our youth possess, too.

An other example: French is a beautiful language, and French threads through a wonderful part of our nation and heritage. Let's learn French.

And, what other areas are there that are in the dark... and prone to be marginalised by our prejudice?
Let's expose those areas and repent so that they too can come to light,... so that we can come to light..... and our children!

Moreover, let us pray for the well-being of our enemies and those that make us feel uncomfortable, we can at least view them in the light, too?

Can we also..... nourish each other with encouragement and positive reinforcement?

Share your vision / your dreams,... and listen to the hopes of others.
We can bask in the bright side of the day, if we choose to.

We can let go of the criticism and the negativism that darkens the soul, and we can cling to / hold onto the hope that is in Christ.

Life in God's domain is abundant..... when we look for it and choose God's way the way Jesus modelled for us.

Nevertheless,..... for most of us..... it comes down to our own internal struggle.
Sadly, for some of us, we have been taught to judge ourselves harshly.
We have learned to be self condemning, and therefore live what we know.... and see the world through very dark glasses, and our perception reinforces our interactions and the spiral down continues.

I'll close with a story most of us have heard before. A story I've told before. The source of the story has been credited to many different sorts of people. I don't know who created it; I'll tell it in the context of the Sioux Nation.

One winter's evening while gathered round a blazing camp fire, an old Sioux chief told his grandson about the inner struggle that goes on inside people.

"You see" said the old man, "this inner struggle is like two wolves fighting each other. One is evil, full of anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, deceit, false pride, superiority, and ego".

"The other one," he continued, poking the fire with a stick so that the fire crackled, sending the flames clawing at the night sky, "is good, full of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion and faith".

For a few minutes his grandson pondered his grandfather's words and then asked, "So which wolf wins, grandfather?"

"Well", said the wise old chief, his lined face breaking into a wry smile, "The one you feed!"

The one you feed.

Through the example and Inspiration of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, and by the Grace of God..... we can feed the positive and the good.....In others and ourselves.

The parable that Jesus told is in invitation to repent and to have a second chance at life – to bear Good Fruit.