

Abundant Pardon vs Repent or Perish a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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Isaiah 55:1-9 An Invitation to Abundant Life

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
I will make with you an everlasting covenant,
my steadfast, sure love for David.
See, I made him a witness to the peoples,
a leader and commander for the peoples.
See, you shall call nations that you do not know,
and nations that do not know you shall run to you,
because of the **LORD** your God, the Holy One of Israel,
for he has glorified you.
Seek the **LORD** while he may be found,
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake their way,
and the unrighteous their thoughts;
let them return to the **LORD**, that he may have mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the **LORD**.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9 Repent or Perish

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’ Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; 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 fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I

dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”

JUST WHEN I THINK I have a handle on Jesus, he surprises. Jesus is the one who embraces and inspires and comforts and forgives. But here we find Jesus sounding like John the Baptist: “Repent or Perish!” The disciples were simply sitting around discussing the news of the day, trying to figure out if people brought on their own tragedies, when Jesus, Mr. Compassion, the gentle man who frolicked with children and fed the hungry, said “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. Turn yourself around or you can count on a building collapsing on you some day on the way to work.”

Wouldn't you love to have Jesus at your hospital bedside? "Pastor, did I get this colon cancer because of anything I did in my past?" "Heavens, no," is Jesus' pastoral response. "Where'd you get that idea? Don't give it another thought. But before we pray, let me share this little tidbit with you. Unless you clean up your act, my friend, it's curtains for you." The Word of God.

It sounds to me like the opposite of the Isaiah promise of abundant pardon. But watch what Jesus does. He refuses to spend much time with the faith-shaking, all-time favorite question of "enlightened" Christians: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Instead he tells the story of the fig tree which produced no fruit – but was given a one-year reprieve in order that the gardener may help the tree bear figs. We have grown accustomed to Jesus asking us to confess, to pray, to move through doubt and fear to turn to God, Jesus repeats this; but then says, “God won’t wait forever! You chances are limited!”

What is Jesus doing here? We love the God questions: “Where was God when this happened?” “Who sinned, this man or his father?” “The Haitians must have made God very angry.” “Perhaps she deserved it.” It may be our all-time favorite philosophical question. And you may say to Jesus, "Look, I never slit anybody's throat. I never designed a shoddily constructed building that collapsed on anybody." And you would be right.

But Jesus is saying today, at least in part, that the headlines that grab our attention and raise our moral revulsion are finally a smokescreen for the more subtle sin that is in each of us: It’s too easy to declare, it is not about us. It is about them—We don’t need to change, to forgive, to love, to work for justice – it’s someone else’s job. What must we repent of?

The word “perish” refers to a total end – to death. But Jesus implies that is not always physical death; it could be emotional and spiritual death as well. For who is to say that such collective sin does not do more damage -- more damage to the ecosystem, more damage to the hope of eradicating global poverty, and more damage to the widening

racial divisions in our country-- than a boatload of evil villains and a century's worth of natural disasters? It is easy for Christianity to exist in a vacuum, shouting condemnations of what we are "against" in the world or who might have sinned in this world. It is quite easy to talk back to the evening news and rail about the world's problems. Exponentially more difficult is being honest about the sin in ourselves.

Jesus knows something that we often forget. It isn't the headlines that define the world's problems. It's us. We're all the problem. "For three years I've come looking for fruit on this tree, and still I find none." Ultimately, our obsession with headlines is just a diversion from the real territory Jesus wants us to enter. More fruit will be harvested there than from a lifetime of watching the evening news.

Every time we think we know what God is thinking . . . think again. Every time we become convinced the whole truth has been revealed . . . go back to digging. "My ways are not your ways, says our God."

Consider our text from Isaiah. The people of Israel had suffered military defeat, exile to Babylon, lost freedom, crushed hopes, shattered dreams. Israel was languishing in Babylonian exile because she had ignored her God and run after false gods and blasphemed God's holy name. To anyone looking at their situation it was obvious: they were a broken, despondent people. Their special status as the covenanted people? Lost forever.

And now, what does God say to her? "Why pay for what is unhealthy? My nourishment is for free. Come. Return to me, for I will have mercy on you and will abundantly pardon" It reminds us of the words of our Lord on the cross when the nails held him up against the sky, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says our God."

We humans don't do very well with forgiveness. If someone has ignored us for most of our life, we have eliminated her from our list of friends and treated her with indifference. If certain persons have said all sorts of evil things about us, we have counted them as our enemies and often vowed revenge. If we have been hurt, we built a wall against compassion. If others have accused us of wrong against them, we have treated them with scorn or ridicule. Nor are we comfortable with confession. God offers us a different way.

- God forgives when we can not.
- God loves when we would not.
- God gives when we are emptied out.
- God restores when we are hollowed out.
- God overflows when we are self-absorbed.
- God promises when we are noncommittal.

Why do we buy into and buy up normal consumer culture? Why do we get caught up in the "more is better" mantra? And when more isn't better, but is somehow just "more" of

the same old emptiness, why do we go out and look for other stuff that we hope will fill us up? Why is it, somewhere out there in the mall-sprawl we can find a sale rack of happiness, a new spring line of fulfillment. We keep wandering from store to store, experience to experience, digging ourselves deeper and deeper into a debt of discontentment.

Isaiah asked his people the same question the Church needs to ask us again today: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?"

Normal stuff just isn't ever going to satisfy our spiritual longings. That is why we have such an out-of-bounds, off-the-wall God. All God asks of us is to join in the madness! In the end it is not abundant pardon versus repent or perish. It is both/and. All God wants is for us to respond to God's covenant, which enables us to

- Forgive, when we feel like condemning.
- Accept when we feel like blaming.
- Love when we feel like hating.
- Give more when we feel like quitting.
- Return when we feel like running.

With God, it is always both/and. But time is running out!

Amen.