

Lent 2C: Luke 13:31-35
Church of the Good Shepherd
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Break Our Hearts for What Breaks Yours

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How I've longed for you! How often have I desired to gather you to myself." This is no pious or perfunctory comment. This is a cry of passion, of love and hurt and grief. And it is the cry not simply of Jesus but of God himself, expressing the deep love of a Father for His children. It is the voice of God's longing, of God's seeking, searching love, of God's yearning for his people, people who have chosen to walk their own path, a path that God knows will bring them misery.

Many of you can understand this feeling, this pain. You know what it is to love someone who turns away from you, who is dead-set on going down a path you know will disappoint, that will end in grief, for them and for you. Maybe it is a child, or a spouse, or a friend, maybe even a parent. All you want to do is to protect them, to shield them, to save them from hurt, from themselves. But instead they reject you, ignore you, want nothing to do with you. They might get defensive, lash out at you, attack you, even blame you when what you've been warning them about comes true. You can't help but feel hurt by it, angry too. Why didn't they listen to you? How could they act this way, like *you're* the bad guy, when all you want is good for them? Don't they understand that you love them and so when they suffer, you suffer with them?

Jesus knew that frustration, that longing full well, let me tell you. He knew that human hearts could be as cold and hard as stone—resisting, rejecting, pushing God away. He knew about how prophets before him had been stoned and murdered, and he had experienced rejection and distrust in his own ministry. He offered the people love, love that many received, but which many others resisted—arguing, opposing, plotting, conniving. And here Jesus lets us in on what it is like to be on the receiving end of that. We might think of God as some impersonal force or stoic personage, who's unsympathetic when we suffer the consequences of our mistakes or, worse, that God is eager to see us punished for them. To the contrary, what Jesus shows us is how much it grieves God when his people reject his care and protection.

Now, there was a time when we Christians read this story and smugly condemned the Jews for rejecting Christ. "That's what you get for your unbelief." But I think we know now, are self-aware enough to recognize that Jesus might as well be talking about *us* here: "Church, O Church, why have you forsaken me. How I longed to gather you to myself. But instead you fight with each other, you have neglected the faith, twisted it, you have cared more about your comfort than about those who do not know me."

This last charge is especially indicting, for it's not just that we haven't done something we should have done. Rather, it points to a deeper faithlessness—our refusal to draw close to Christ. Jesus wants to gather us to him, like a mother hen, he says. This is not just for our protection. For, at the same time that he covers us, he draws us to his bosom, near to his heart, so that we might hear his heartbeat and so know his heart, what he cares about most, what hurts him. They

say that you don't really know someone until you know what causes them pain. And in this passage, we see that what hurts Jesus most is when someone refuses to come to him, to return his love, even attacking him for it.

I saw a Garfield comic strip a few years ago that illustrates well this situation. John, Garfield's owner, tries to give Garfield a hug, only the cat is having nothing of it. As John tries to embrace Garfield, he pushes John away, at the same time sinking his claws into John's chest. I guess the image was supposed to be funny, but it struck me as a vivid picture of how we often act towards God—pushing him away, claws dug in.

And yet, God refuses to give up on us. God doesn't play the game, "Since you don't like me, I'm not going to like you." Rather, again and again, God calls us to return. Through prophets and sages, God revealed his love and our faithlessness. Finally, he sent Jesus, his Son, to show us how far God will go to restore us to him. By his torture and death on our behalf, Jesus bore witness to the Father's suffering love, making the cross a symbol not of tragedy but of love poured out for a people who cannot accept it.

So then, as Christians, we approach Jesus' lament today on two levels. On one level, we understand ourselves as being among those for whom Jesus weeps. We have grieved God by our faithlessness, our hardheartedness. But on another level, insofar as we allow ourselves to be drawn to Jesus, we share with him in his pain for those who reject him, who insist on their own way, who follow their own lights.

And so as much as we might like to write off those who reject the Gospel—"Look, you turned your back on Jesus, so you're on your own. Good luck!"—as much as we might like to do that, we can't. Because Jesus doesn't turn his back on them or on us. God may remove his blessing, his protection from them, let them live as they want, apart from him. But that doesn't mean that Jesus just walks away. No, he is with them, with them as their stiff-neckedness leads them to misery. Indeed, he suffers with them, and ultimately suffers at their hands.

We in our culture like to talk about "love," and as Christian we like to talk about how "God is love." It sounds so positive, so welcoming, so caring. But what we forget, what we like to ignore is that the kind of love that characterizes God, that Jesus witnesses to, is not a soft, feel-good, sentimental love. It is rather a hard, determined, suffering love, a love that exposes itself to rejection, a love that hurts for the beloved. That is the kind of love that we invoke when we say "God is love," when we say that we are called to "love one another" and "love our neighbors."

This love is not about being "open," "tolerant," "accepting," or even "gracious," the kind of "love" that basically means agreeing to stay out of others' lives, if they stay out of ours. That kind of "love," so defiantly defended today, has brought about an epidemic of loneliness, as we all remain strangers, autonomous individuals, with no one challenging us or questioning our motivations, but no one getting close to us either.

Nor is the love God exhibits a doormat love, a pushover love, a weak love, where you cannot help allowing yourself to be abused, because you feel like you deserve it or because you don't

like confrontation and you are willing to do whatever you can to keep the peace, for fear that the other person might leave.

No, the kind of love that Jesus has for us is a love that comes from Jesus knowing who he is, who he is for us. Jesus has bound himself to us in love, made a commitment to us and our good, and nothing, not even our ingratitude, not even our rejection, is going to change that, going to change him. God made a decision long ago how He was going to be towards humanity, a decision not to hold us at arm's length, lest He be hurt, or to give in to our demands, out of fear we will leave Him, but to love us even if it means suffering, because that's who God is, because that's what love means.

It's like the story of the monk and the scorpion. A monk was walking alongside a stream when he saw a scorpion struggling in the water. Knowing that scorpions cannot swim, he quickly plunged into the water to rescue it. Carefully, he picked the scorpion up with his fingers and walked to the bank. Just when he was about to set the scorpion down, it stung him again. The monk drew his hand back in pain and as a result the scorpion was flung back into the stream. When the monk realized what happened, he went back into the water and picked up the scorpion. But just as the monk was about to set the scorpion down, he was again stung by it on the hand. This scene repeated several times until the monk finally saved the scorpion. A little boy was playing by the stream when he witnessed this whole incident. Confused, he asked the monk, "Why do you keep trying to save that scorpion? It stings you every time you try to rescue it." The monk replied, "Just as it is the water's nature to make me wet, so it is the nature of the scorpion to sting. And just as it is the scorpion's nature to sting, it is my nature to save."

And so just as it is our nature to grieve God, it is God's nature to love us, to want the best for us, to desire that we be restored to Him. That love does not change because of our failure or our unwillingness to return that love. We may hurt God or insult him, out of ignorance or self-protection, but God does not allow our response to change who He is.

This attitude, this approach helps me to understand those parents who refuse to give up on their children, even when those children do everything to reject and hurt their parents. Growing up, I knew a father whose daughter was determined, it seemed, to ruin her life. Her father and mother divorced when she was young, but try as he did, his daughter refused his overtures of love and care. She stopped going to his house, wouldn't return his phone calls. He was beside himself trying to figure out what he did wrong. He could only watch as her grades declined, she fell in with the wrong crowd, made life decisions he knew would not be good for her. After she went away to college, he barely ever saw her. He'd invite her to dinner, invite her over for the holidays, kept putting himself out there, letting himself to get his hopes up, only to have the football pulled out from under him at the last minute, like Lucy did to Charlie Brown. But the father never gave up.

I wish I had a happy ending to share, to be able to tell you that his daughter eventually came around. But I lost touch with the family, and don't know what happened to them. And, for a long time, I could not understand why the father made himself vulnerable to being hurt, why he continued to love her. But then I considered God's behavior towards us, and I got it. He did it

because that was who he was—a father who loved his daughter—just as God loves us, because that is who he is.

God does not give up on us. He actively pursues us. He puts himself out there, knowing He will be ignored. He reaches out to us, knowing his hand will be slapped. He tries to embrace us, and doesn't flinch when He gets claws in his chest. Because that is who God is, that's how love is. Love means being vulnerable, it means accepting suffering.

And just as God risks himself in loving us, we are called to risk ourselves in loving others, our family members of course but also our neighbors, especially those who do not know Jesus. Many of you, I know, have over the years invited friends and neighbors and coworkers to Good Shepherd, only to be turned down and disappointed. And I've had my share of rejection and dismissals, too, as I've knocked on doors in the surrounding neighborhood. Now, we *could* just write off our neighbors—"Well, I don't want you at my church anyway." *Or* we could accept that that is the risk that comes with loving, that others may not love us back, and keep asking, keep inviting anyway.

As we seek to grow closer to Jesus this Lent, we must desire to know not just the mind of Christ but also his heart, to share in his love and thus also his pain. We know from today's reading how we break God's heart, but we also know that God continues to love us, because that is who God is. And we are called to be that way too. So we pray: God, grant us the grace to love as you love us. Lord, break our hearts for what breaks yours. Amen.