

“Publish or Perish”

Luke 13:1-9

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For most college and university faculty members, the phrase “publish or perish” is not only a reality of academia today, but a threat held daily over their heads. Simply teaching students well is no longer the most important criterion to be an excellent and long-lived member of the faculty. These days, your tenure, both literally and figuratively, is dependent on the number of articles and books you write, and the number of lectures and conferences at which you present, and generally speaking, the height of your profile in your selected discipline.

Universities regard this idea of “publish or perish” as a measure of their faculty’s ability and willingness to stretch, grow, and most importantly, bring prestige and grant money to the institution. There is no resting on one’s laurels or reputation.

The university administrators who demand such labors from their professors must be very wise people, for they have adopted the idea of “publish or perish” from no less a wise man than Jesus, who, I believe, also found resting on one’s laurels to be an objectionable idea, as we shall see in today’s passage from Luke. It must be said from the very beginning that Jesus was not, and I am not, suggesting that one’s works, one’s publications, if you will, are one’s ticket to God’s favor, but that God’s favor must give rise to good works or it is no favor at all. In all of Jesus’ ethical teaching, there is a consistent message that God’s gift of

faith must be lived out intentionally, comprehensively, and generously. And a helpful way to think about that has been suggested by DeWitt Jones, a photographer for National Geographic Magazine and motivational speaker, who says that we are called to “publish” what we do in our lives. By that he means to use the gift of faith, and the gifts God has given us, in service to the world, to be the best “*for* the world,” and not just the best “*in* the world.” Jones likes to say about his own work, “So where do I first publish my photographs? In my life: in who I am and how I act everyday.”

To “publish it in your life” captures well, I think, the idea of the fruits of the repentance to which Jesus is directing the crowd he is teaching. In our passage this morning, Jesus is talking to a crowd, teaching them about faith and preparedness for judgment and finally, in this passage, repentance. He is questioned by some of those present, who want to know what he thinks about a recent incident in Jerusalem. They want to know what this rabbi, this teacher, thinks about current events. The crowd wants to know what Jesus thinks of the fact that some residents of Galilee were killed in the Temple by the Romans, who in the process, had tainted the Galileans’ blood with that of the animals they were sacrificing, or vice versa. Presumably, the crowd is curious as to whether their gruesome deaths said something about their lives, namely whether or not they were great sinners whose suffering was, in some twisted way, deserved. Do not forget that this is a significant Biblical theme, that one’s suffering or prosperity is

connected with one's piety. This logic dictates that those who are afflicted with disease, poverty, or other forms of suffering, are not right with God, have done something wrong, are sinners. Conversely, if your crops come in on time and your daughters are beautiful and you live a long life, you have deserved it because you were righteous and obeyed the law. This is not the only Biblical view on the subject, certainly, and the entire book of Job argues against it, but it does exist and Jesus now weighs in on it.

What the crowd probably wants is confirmation that these Galileans were sinners who got what they deserved. What kind of wicked deeds had they performed that would merit them such a fate? Who slept with whom, who stole from whom, who dissed whom? They want reassurance that bad things happen to bad people and that they will therefore be safe, since they themselves are good. But rather than feed the rumor mill, or feed them spiritual comfort food, Jesus flat out tells them that they are all in the same boat where sin is concerned and that rather than worry about the sins of others, they'd better spend some time worrying about their own sin. "I tell you," Jesus says, "unless you repent, you will perish as they did." Twice he says it: "Unless you repent, you will perish as they did." He is *not* saying that unless they repent they will perish at the hand of Pilate, in the Temple, indistinguishable from the slain sacrificial animals, but simply that unless they repent, they will be indistinguishable from all the other unrepentant sinners,

dead or alive, to no lesser or greater a degree than these Galileans about whom they are gossiping. Publish or perish.

And so Jesus calls the crowd to repentance, to publish it in their lives, to be the best for the world, not just in the world. Now, repentance is a complicated matter, both theologically and practically. Nobody ever said publishing it in our lives was easy. But it is something worthy of our reflection, especially during the penitential season of Lent. One of the most helpful things I've ever read about repentance is a book called "On Repentance," written by one of the most influential Jewish rabbis of the 20th century, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, affectionately known as "the Rav." Jewish as he may be, it seems to me the Rav has something to share, as it is from a Jewish context that our story in Luke comes, and as Jesus is dealing with repentance here from a Jewish mindset. The Rav begins his discussion about repentance by observing that there are two aspects to the idea of atonement, or "being one with God." Going back into the Old Testament, he finds that there is a distinction to be made between *acquittal* of sin, the legal aspect, and *purification* from sin, or the psychological and moral aspect. Both are necessary to be fully reconciled with God and community, but both are treated differently.

According to the Rav, and I think he makes a good case, Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, is God's annual gift of *kapparah*, or acquittal of sin, the removal of divine punishment of the whole nation and every individual in it.

When the scapegoat is sent of into the wilderness, whether or not a person has actively repented of their sin, confessed it, and asked for forgiveness, God's grace is sufficient that they shall suffer no divine penalty as a result of the sin. This is the grace of belonging to the beloved community. But Yom Kippur, though it satisfies God's sense of vengeance and need for punishment, does not have the immediate effect of reconciliation between the individual and God. You see, just as one is not cast out of the fold for the lack of repentance, neither does one participate fully in the community without it. Herein lies the need for *taharah*, or purification, and both the internal process of anguished repentance *and* the outward process of turning away from the sin and from anything which might lead you down the path to the sin. Remember, now, that the Hebrew word for "repentance" means literally, "to turn around," to turn away from the sin.

Through confession, through stopping the sin and preventing yourself from being in the position to sin again, you attain the purification from the sin which allows you to experience the communion with God and neighbor which we all seek. The debris of your life is cleared away, the obstacles to knowing God intimately are removed, and your atonement is complete, in both its legal and spiritual dimensions.

Obviously, Christians do not celebrate Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. We find our atonement in Jesus Christ, in whose body we understand our penalty to be paid. No annual ritual of atonement is necessary. Our acquittal is won. We

need not worry about divine judgment. We are, in the language of the church, “saved.” But, I would suggest, the Rav’s understanding of the complexity of atonement is not applicable only to Jews. Remember that there are the two parts, acquittal and repentance, necessary for complete atonement. For us too, our atonement is not complete without the process of purification that involves the wrenching, internal soul searching, confessing, and action-taking of repentance that will lead us to abundant life, the life described in today’s passage from Isaiah, “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.” Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life, and have it abundantly.” Christ has freed us to seek purification and abundant life through the practice of repentance.

And so, going back to today’s lesson, Jesus says, “Unless you repent, you will perish just as they did,” as sinners not fully reconciled with God, as sinners who do not experience the fullness of that abundant life. You will perish without ever having produced fruit from your trees, and your life will be worth nothing more than firewood. You will be like that fig tree spared only by the gardener’s plea. You are no different than any other sinner, for God has removed divine punishment from all, but unless you repent, you also will be no different than any other acquitted sinner who has not repented. Those who are suffering are not under a greater judgment than those who are prospering, and those who are

prospering have no *less* need for purification through repentance. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and all are in need of repentance for true reconciliation. Repentance means turning away from sin, doing something different, and publishing it in your life, putting it down indelibly on paper. We may have no divine penalty hanging over our heads because of what Jesus did, but we will never find abundant life until we do our part in the atonement. Unless we repent, we will perish just as they did, people who lived with only half the relationship with God they could have had.

Repentance is hard work. It's more than feeling bad or saying you're sorry. It's more than a feeling. It's action which must be published in your life if it is to overcome the distance which sin creates between you and God. Repentance is about publishing in your life the grace you have experienced in God. You don't have to write the great American novel, but you do have to put pen to paper. You don't have to take a stunningly beautiful photograph, but you do have to take off the lens cap and squeeze the shutter. You don't have to win the race but you do have to get out of the starting blocks and head for the finish line.

You will recall that this Lent we are reflecting more intentionally on the discipline of generosity, an area in each of our lives just as ripe for repentance as any other, and maybe even moreso given our relative wealth compared to, say, seventy or eighty percent of the rest of the world. We heard earlier in the service from our young people who reflected on their generosity, and asked you to reflect

on yours, by participating in World Vision's 30-hour Famine, the proceeds of which went to provide food for malnourished people in Africa. They published their faith in their lives by turning away, at least for a little while, from their own needs, their own stinginess, their own self-centeredness. Quite appropriately for Lent, they turned away from great abundance to be more fully able to appreciate that abundance and so that others might share in it. They published their generosity by offering themselves for others. They are trying to be the best for the world, and not just the best in the world. My hunch is that they are a little more "at one" with God, their repentance having helped them reconnect with both God and the rest of the world. In this instance, our young people are our professors, having learned that where their generosity is concerned, it's publish or perish. May we each be a professor to the world of God's generosity, by demonstrating our own. Amen.