

Lent 3C March 4 2010

Luke 13:1-9

The Manure Cure

In the early 1700's before the first shots of the Revolutionary war were fired, another revolution was sweeping through the American colonies. This fiery religious revival was dubbed "The Great Awakening" and preachers like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield fueled the flames of conversion with vivid images and emotional appeals. They understood people to be sick with an eternally deadly disease. *They were sick with sin* and the best way to get people to take the medicine of the gospel was to give them what I call the "Hell Cure". Here, in words from one of Edward's own sermons, is a little taste for you:

"Like Noah's flood, the wrath of God will be an ocean without shores. It will be misery that will have no end, a mighty deluge of wrath, which will be ten thousand times worse than a deluge of waters; for it will be a deluge of liquid fire, as in the Scriptures it is called a lake of fire and brimstone.

If you will not hearken to the many warnings which are given you of approaching destruction, you will be guilty of more than brutish madness. For even the ox and the ass know upon whom they are dependent, and whom they must obey, and they act accordingly. But you, so long as you neglect your own salvation, act as if you knew not God, your Creator and Proprietor, nor your dependence upon him.

Such folly and madness are you guilty of; who refuse to hearken to the warnings that are given you of the approaching flood of the wrath of God. You have been once more warned today, while the door of the ark yet stands open. Take heed therefore that you do not still stop your ears and still neglect the great work which you have to do lest the flood of wrath suddenly come upon you, sweep you away, and there be no remedy."

The "Hell Cure" is effective. I mean who wants to end up in a lake of fire? Crowds of 20 or even 30 thousand people gorged on Great Awakening preachers in open-air services and churches filled up overnight. Today, there are many who still preach the "Hell Cure" as the best (or only) way to bring people to God. It surfaced last week at the Dare2Share conference I attended with the youth and it spills out into the airwaves from radio and television preachers who tap into some of our deepest emotions.

Now I don't discount the possibility that God can work through anything and anyone, but it seems to me that if Jesus thought the "Hell cure" was effective, he would have told the story of the gardener a bit differently. Instead of trying to nourish and care for the fig tree, the gardener would have stood over it and yelled,

"Now listen up you worthless piece of wood! Either you start showing me some figs or I'm going to get the chainsaw out. That's right, the chainsaw! Maybe all those rows of sharp, jagged teeth that go around and around and around will help you see the need for you to change your ways".

But of course that is not the story Jesus told. In response to the very real condition of evil and suffering in the world, where sickness and death have no explanation – where all kinds of people find themselves 'goin thru hell' for one reason or another- Jesus provides a much different cure for what ails us. Jesus prescribes the "[Manure Cure](#)". It may not be as flashy as the "Hell Cure" but Jesus knows that **fear is not fruitful**. If you want fruit, you need to feed the tree, sometimes with the nutrients found in the very messes we make.

Lutherans have always taken the approach that God's grace in Jesus Christ [is life and light for the world](#), not a get out-of-Hell-free-card. Salvation is not just avoiding divine punishment. It is the [freedom](#) that comes from forgiveness. It is the [power](#) to live without shame. It is the [ability](#) to radically love the world as God has first loved us. That is what the "Manure Cure" offers. We are given a gift of grace, which makes us truly alive, and so we produce fruit. That means God invites us to participate in the creative process itself! God uses US to make a difference for this world and the people in it. We re-gift the grace we have received so that someone else can know they are loved and forgiven.

In short, God takes our smelly, dead, waste products and transforms them into beautiful, sweet and luscious bits of new and ongoing life! What happens to me after I die is in God's hands, not mine. So while I am alive on this planet, faith in the reality of **Easter colors my world with hope and not fear**. I have hope that the God who died on a cross for all of us, descended into hell, destroyed its power, and offers the gift of unending life to the world.

But the urgency of Jesus' words mean **time is of the essence**. Too often, way too often, we breathe a sigh of relief once the bottle of "Hell Cure" is put back on the shelf. We get comfortable in the rich soil we find ourselves in and we forget that our actions (and inactions) have eternal consequences. There will come a day when our time of living

here will be over but the love that we show, the forgiveness we grant, the faith that we share, continues to reverberate through the lives of all those we touch. But so does suffering and brokenness. Jesus says, "Repent"! Let the grace and mercy of God transform your lives before it is too late.

None of us knows when that will be. I might be here to preach next week or I might not so Jesus says to us, "Make the most of every moment. Don't let opportunity pass you by. **Repent!** Turn around! Change your ways! Do the things that really matter. Not out of fear of hell **but because you are too valuable to go to waste.** There are people counting on you. God will use YOU to answer their prayers and in return, your life will be changed as well. **Repent!** Because God loves you! **Repent!** Or you will die without having the chance to really live!"

Time is of the essence. What fruit are we bearing? What bits of life do we offer to this hurting and suffering world? As a church, we have the gifts of God in Word and sacrament. We have helping hands and rich resources. We have passion, and experience, creativity and wisdom. **I look at all of you and I see a spreader full of manure... but if it's not put to use growing fruit for God's kingdom, it's only going to turn rancid and foul up our lives.** God is calling us to a life of faithful living. -A life of generous giving and radical love. -A life that tills up the hard soil of suffering and death and fertilizes it with the good news of God's amazing grace. Somebody that you meet today may need to hear that word of grace to pull them out of the depths of hell. Give em the "Manure cure" and watch what kind of amazing fruit God will grow!