

Letting Go of Theology that Harms

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Luke 13: 31-35: At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Today is the second Sunday of Lent, but really for us is the first week to really talk about it as last week we focused on our visioning work for this year. Lent is the six weeks leading up to Easter and is often associated with a time to give something up--maybe chocolate or alcohol or caffeine. Some even choose to fast entirely one day a week. I've practiced those disciplines before during Lent and, at times, they have helped me feel more connected to God and more disciplined in how I live. But if I'm honest, a lot of the time, giving something up felt mostly like a burden. And especially during these last two years when we've all had to give up so much already, the thought of giving up something else feels heavy to me.

But what I've realized is that the invitation of Lent is not to give something up simply for the sake of giving it up. Rather, it's an invitation to examine our lives and to let go of the things that are preventing us from feeling fully alive while also possibly taking up some things that do. During Lent, our sermon series will focus on the theme, "Letting Go," as each week, we explore the gospel reading and the invitation that Jesus offers us to let go of those things that can make our relationship with God and with others more difficult and instead to intentionally choose those things that bring life to ourselves and the world around us. And to begin I want to invite us to consider what it would mean to let go of any theology that harms – that harms us, that harms others, that harms the planet. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

When I started middle school, I joined the youth group at my church. And I loved it. Well, let me back up. I always loved church. I loved the hymns. I loved our Wacky Wednesday's where after school, the church bus would pick us up and basically we'd throw slime on each other. I loved Sunday school. And I couldn't wait to join the youth group. Every Wednesday night, we'd meet and spend an hour playing basketball in our gym, hang out with friends, and then have a lesson. It was great. So I invited my friend Jeremy to come with me.

Jeremy was a good friend of mine. We played at each other's houses. He taught me how to fish in the lake behind his house. I helped him learn how to hit a baseball. But his family didn't go to church, so I invited him to come to church with me. Now, let me be careful here. I wasn't inviting him to church because I was trying to save him. He wasn't from a bad home situation. It wasn't one of those things where his parents were addicts or abusive and he needed a

supportive community. His Mom was great. His step-dad was great. They were a loving family for whom church was just not a part of their life. I invited him because I thought church was fun and that he would like it.

And he did.

So every Wednesday, he'd come over to my house after school and hang out until time for youth group. We'd get our homework done, play, and then go to church. And then his Mom would come and pick us up, drop me off at my house, and then they'd go home. And we'd do the same thing again the next week.

Around that time, we, along with all the other churches in our small town were taking their youth groups to a conference by a guy named Dawson McAllister. This guy was the left behind series before the left behind series was out. His conferences were all about the second coming of Jesus, the end times, and being ready for the rapture. He graphically described hell in hopes of scaring us into a relationship with Christ so we wouldn't go there. And he had a list of people that he was pretty sure were in hell:

The Beatles

People who used drugs

Gay folks

People who committed suicide...and so on.

Now, there's one part of Jeremy's story I haven't told you. He did come from a loving, supportive home. But it was a home with a deep place of pain. Specifically, his biological father committed suicide when he was very young. Now imagine that you are a 12 year old boy who 3 or 4 years earlier, your dad killed himself. Your family has just put the pieces back together as best as they can. Your Mom has gotten married again. Your life is starting to get back to normal. You start going to church for the first time in your life and it's a good, safe place for you and then you go to a youth retreat and hear that people who commit suicide are in hell. You hear that your Dad is in hell.

I never talked with Jeremy about this. I don't know what he felt or thought about all of this. But I do know he never came back to church.

And I know I don't blame him one bit.

You see, the gospel is all about life, hope, love. Jesus himself said, "I've come that you might have life and have it abundantly," and yet far too often the theology that is espoused about this gospel does just the opposite.

Harmful theology turns people away from church.

Harmful theology literally causes PTSD.

Harmful theology, at its worst, can and has made people in the queer and trans communities want to harm or even kill themselves.

Harmful theology makes people feel they are justified in killing others.

What we say about God, what we say about who God includes and who God excludes matters immensely. Jesus did a lot of things, but I think maybe we could argue that his entire life was about rejecting bad theology, or in other words, his entire life was about rejecting thoughts and ideas about God that lead to pain, exclusion and death and instead offering us a different way to understand God – one that leads to life and life abundantly. We see this work of doing good theology and opposing bad theology in our Scripture today. In this case, Jesus is opposing two bad theologies.

First, is the theology of Herod, the theology that says God is on the side of the powerful. First, a little history lesson. Herod was a Jew who was allowed to be “king of the Jews” by the Roman empire. The way Rome worked was that any territory they conquered, they allowed a local, indigenous ruler to be in power so long as that person kept Rome happy, specifically that person had to make sure there would be no rebellion against Rome and that taxes would flow in to Rome. So long as Rome got their money and loyalty, then Herod would have some autonomy. In a sense then, Herod could try to have it both ways – he was a part of the Roman empire and part of the Jewish community at the same time, and as such would have practiced the Jewish religion while using Rome’s methods of holding onto power. He would have gone to temple and synagogue. He would have claimed to worship Yahweh along with the other Jewish people. But like many astute politicians before him and after him, to this day, he was able to manipulate religion to serve his political purposes. It’s God’s will for him to be king, therefore, any resistance to Herod is not only resistance to a person, it’s resistance to God – so says the theology of Herod.

[Maybe add Diana Bass’ take on the Ukrainian conflict]

And this is a theology that literally kills. Herod’s father had killed all of the babies of Bethlehem 2 years old and younger hoping to kill Jesus. The Herod in our reading today had slaughtered all of his political opponents who sent a petition to the Roman emperor asking for a new king. This is the same Herod who beheaded John the Baptist. This is the theology that says God is on the side of the tyrant, that it is God’s will when the people suffer under the oppression of the tyrant. And it is a theology that has been asserted both implicitly and explicitly by tyrants throughout the ages. This is the theology that says God wants to kill your enemies and that might makes right.

But Jesus won’t have it. He calls Herod a fox, meaning that he is deceiving. Basically, Jesus is calling Herod a liar. What Herod embodies is the opposite of what God is about. Herod’s theology is meant to deceive, it’s meant to be a smokescreen to justify his hold on to power at

all costs ambition. So Jesus calls it for what it is. Deceptive. Untrue. Herod is a fox and his theology is a lie. There is nothing compatible with the theology of Jesus and the theology of Herod. When the gospel writers refer to Jesus as the “king of the Jews,” they are making an overt political statement. No wonder Herod’s father tried to kill Jesus when he was a baby. Jesus is the true king, not Herod. Herod is a fox, lying about God to aid his own thirst for power.

The second theology in this story is a little more under the surface. It’s that of the Pharisees. Now make no mistake, the Pharisees did not like Herod. They knew he was corrupt and violent. They were not his supporters. And on the surface, it looks like they are trying to warn Jesus to be careful because they know all too well the evil Herod is capable of. They tell Jesus to leave before Herod can get him. But they had another reason they wanted Jesus to leave. They too had a dangerous theology. You see, some of the Pharisees believed that God allowed the Romans and people like Herod to rule over them because the Jewish people had turned away from God, they had not kept the commandments. They came up with a list of 613 rules that they thought all the people should follow to be right with God. Those that didn’t follow them, or couldn’t follow them were considered unclean and, therefore, they were the scapegoats for the pain of all the people. This is the theology that says good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, so if something bad is happening to you, then it’s your own fault. But they took it a step further – the bad things that have happened to the entire Jewish community are laid at the feet of the unclean – the lepers, the women whose husbands left them, the Samaritans.

On the surface, this is a kinder, gentler theology than that of Herod, but it is equally dangerous. This is the theology that says, “Well, we have to love the sinner but hate the sin.” This is the theology that cares more about rules than love, more about rules than people. This is the theology most like that which my friend Jeremy heard at that youth conference – it’s the addict’s fault...it’s the fault of those who killed themselves...it’s the fault of ...and all you have to do is fill in the blank of whatever group this theology wants to scape goat.

But again, Jesus won’t have it. Notice how he responds, “I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow.” In other words, Jesus makes it clear that he will show tangible acts of love to the very people declared to be unclean. It’s like Jesus is saying, “No one – not Herod, the fox, not the hypocrites, will stop me from loving those who have been most hurt by bad theology.”

And then Jesus gives us an image of what good theology looks like. He says, “I have desired to gather your children together like a mother hen gathers her children under her wings.” God is always a loving parent. Think for a minute about all the images of God you’ve had in life – images that you may have been taught as a kid, or heard from someone in church, or maybe even developed yourself. If any of those images are that of a overbearing task master, let them go. If any of those images are remarkably similar to the tyrants of this world, let them go. If any of those images make you feel shame for who you are, let them go. Let those harmful images of God, that harmful theology go and never pick them up again. And instead, receive the image that Jesus offers you, the theology that Jesus offers you. God is like a mother hen who wants

nothing more than to gather you under her wings, to shelter and protect you, to tell you it's going to be ok, to love you no matter what.

May love, then, be our guide for anything we ever claim about God. May we ask of ourselves, "Is what we are saying about God, loving towards all." If so, then I am certain it is good theology. And if not, may we let it go forever.

Amen.