

In discussing this passage from Luke, William Willimon wrote: “This Sunday’s Gospel presents a real challenge. Here is how I describe that challenge. The contemporary North American church has succeeded in sentimentalizing Jesus to the point where we have taken the romantic ‘gentle Jesus meek and mild’ of the 19th century, and reworked him into Jesus our good friend, our buddy, our therapist who always affirms and never criticizes, always blesses and never curses. And yet today’s gospel presents us with an unsettling, judgmental Jesus.”

I have always thought of Jesus as full of grace and forgiveness, and it’s true, Jesus offers us amazing, unconditional love and grace. Like so many others, I don’t like to think of Jesus as my judge. I guess I have fallen in the same trap as so many others -- give me a Jesus who will comfort me and make me feel good, but leave the Jesus who demands something of me behind.

Jesus was speaking about signs of judgment when bad news came to him. We don’t know who brought the news to Jesus. Luke just referred to them as “some present”. In any case, some people came to tell Jesus about some Galileans “whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” They were offering their sacrifices at the Temple when Pilate inexplicably executes every one of them. And not only that, he mixed their blood with the blood of the animals they had come to sacrifice.

This is the only place in the Gospels where Pilate appears before Jesus’ crucifixion. We know from biblical history that Pilate could be a brutal ruler. If you got in his way he would take you out. So these people came to Jesus to see what he thought about what Pilate did to those innocent worshipers. Jesus would not be drawn into their conversation and was not going to offer excuses as to why this tragedy happened. Instead, he shifted the conversation to where he wanted it to go.

Jesus said, “I tell you, unless you repent, you shall also be under judgment.” Wow! He didn’t get into an extended discussion about why bad things happen to good people or why God would allow something terrible like that to happen. He placed the issue right where it belonged -- with those who came with the questions. It was his way of saying, “Forget about the Galileans. Be concerned about yourself.” I think there are far too many people in this world who are more concerned with what others are doing or

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not doing than they are with themselves. It reminds me of that time when Jesus was talking about judging others and he said, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye but not notice the log in your own?"

Jesus wanted them to be aware that they would be accountable for themselves. Then he did what he did so often and so well; he told them a parable to drive home the point. This time it was about a fig tree. He said:

"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

I think Jesus is trying to tell us something here. I think, first and foremost, he is saying that it really does matter who we are and what kind of lives we lead. We need to be producing fruit for the kingdom. Our mission statement here at FUMC Mexia is "To make and grow disciples of Jesus Christ who bear fruit for the kingdom of God." When we decide to accept Christ and pledge to serve him, we are saying that we will make use of the gifts God has given us and not waste them. Jesus is making it very clear that when push comes to shove the "proof is in the pudding." But while he is saying that, he is also saying at the same time, just when you or someone else is ready to give up on you, think again. Think about second chances.

The fig tree had been given ample time to produce. In fact, three years was considered long enough. But the point Jesus is making is that when the rest of the world might give up on you, even if you have given up on yourself, that is when he says, "Wait a minute. Here's another chance."

Thomas A. Edison was working on a crazy contraption called a "light bulb" and it took a whole team of men 24 straight hours to put just one together. The story goes that when Edison was finished with one light bulb, he gave it to a young boy helper, who nervously carried it up the stairs. Step by step he cautiously watched his hands, obviously frightened of dropping such a priceless piece of work. You've probably guessed what happened by now; the poor young boy dropped the bulb at the top of the stairs. It took the entire team of men twenty-four more hours to make another bulb. Finally, tired and ready for a break, Edison was ready to have his bulb carried up the

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stairs. And guess what he did? He gave it to the same young boy who dropped the first light bulb.

What about you? Have you ever been given a second chance? Do you know what it's like to be given a second chance? To be given a second chance can be one of life's most invigorating experiences.

Roy Riegels knew what it was like to have been given a second chance. On New Year's Day, 1929, Georgia Tech played the University of California in the Rose Bowl. In that game Roy Riegels recovered a fumble for California. Somehow, he became confused and started running 65 yards in the wrong direction. One of his teammates, Benny Lom, outdistanced him and downed him just before he scored for the opposing team. When California attempted to punt, Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety which was the ultimate margin of victory.

The strange play came in the first half, and everyone who was watching the game was asking the same question: "What will Coach Nibbs Price do with Riegels in the second half?" The players filed off the field and went into the dressing room at halftime. They sat down on the benches and on the floor, all but Riegels. He put his blanket around his shoulders, sat down in a corner, and cried like a baby. Coach Price then did something remarkable. He looked at the team and said, "The same team that played the first half will start the second half." The players got up and started out, all but Riegels. He did not budge. The coach looked back and called to him again; still he didn't move. Riegels looked up and said, "Coach, I can't do it to save my life. I've ruined you, I've ruined the University of California, I've ruined myself."

Coach Price put his hand on Riegel's shoulder and said to him: "Roy, get up and go on back; the game is only half over." And Roy Riegels went back, and those Tech players will tell you they have never seen a man play football as Roy Riegels played that second half.

Is there anyone here this morning who wants a second chance? We all want second chances at life. The couple that stands at the altar to be married wants a second chance. They have both been married before and now they have opened their heart once again to love again. It's a second chance. There is young girl who thought she wanted to be a doctor, but somewhere along the way found out that wasn't her calling after all, and she wants a second

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chance as well. She stands in line at the community college registration desk, hands trembling, holding a piece of paper that represents her new beginning, her second chance. There is that man in his mid-50's. He grew up in the church and has attended his whole life, but the Gospel has never really sunk in. Today he is here again and he wants a second chance at faith.

We just shared in Holy Communion. You may have noticed something different about it. It's not the bread. We used the same bread we use every other time we have communion. It's not the grape juice. We used the same grape juice. It's not the liturgy. We said basically the same thing we say at every communion service. The difference is that we shared communion before the sermon. It came at a time when you didn't expect it. It was "out of order". But isn't that the way life is? Life doesn't come "in order". Our congregation knows that all too well this week. Second chances are that way too, however. They come when you least expect them.

I'd like to think of our communion service this morning as a second chance. You may not have thought about it that way when you came forward to receive the elements, but sometimes second chances come our way without us even knowing what is happening to us. God is very much involved in this process of second chances. I like to think of God as the great sculptor who chisels away at us.

In the 1400's a sculptor had ruined a huge piece of marble. It was left in the courtyard of the cathedral in Florence, Italy, for almost 100 years. Everyone thought the marble was beyond repair. But in 1505, a young sculptor by the name of Michelangelo was asked if he thought anything could be done with "The Giant". He measured the block and carefully noted the imperfections. To his mind came the image of the young shepherd boy David. So he carefully made a sketch of that biblical character as he envisioned him. For three years he worked steadily chiseling away at the marble. Finally, when one of his students was allowed to view the towering figure, 18 feet high and weighing 9 tons, he exclaimed, "Master, it lacks only one thing, and that is speech!"

Michelangelo took a seemingly worthless piece of marble and turned it into an artistic masterpiece. Just think what the Creator of the universe could do with us. Just think what we could do with a second chance!