

The God of Second Chances

**Psalm 63 and Luke 13:1-9 | Third Sunday in Lent | March 23, 2025 |
Pastor John Klawiter, preaching**

Grace and peace to you my friends in Christ,

Last Sunday, my colleague in the National Guard, Specialist Dama Gure, came to speak to our Brewed Theology group.

50 people stuck around to ask questions and learn from her about Ramadan and her faith. It was a cool cultural exchange because at the end, she got to ask us a few questions.

One thing we wanted to know is if she experiences Islamophobia—of people mistreating her strictly because of her appearance or religion.

She did not want to dwell on it, but she admitted that she's experienced it. She tried to teach others, but that's not always possible. So sometimes she just has to move on to safety from abuse.

But this led her to ask us, what would you think if you saw me on the street?

I was grateful to hear one of our members pipe up, "I see a beautiful, young woman."

One of the most important values we have as Christians is to see our neighbors as beloved children of God, even if their name for God is different.

I have learned from experience that knowing my neighbor from other religion actually HELPS me to be a better Christian. Understanding and learning from my neighbor isn't a concession that their way is better—or that my faith in Jesus Christ is less. In fact, my faith fluency improved when I realized others wanted to hear why I love Jesus.

One of the questions that I had for Specialist Gure was about the Iftar dinner—literally a Muslim meal at sundown when they break their fast.

I was invited, by the Army, to attend. And the Army was the host of this meal—held at the Cedar Street Armory near the State Capitol.

I didn't realize the co-host was state representative Hussein, the first Somali American elected to represent our state.

Sermon Transcript

After the legislative session ended on Wednesday, many of our bi-partisan elected officials joined together for a shared meal with a diverse group of Muslims.

My boss also attended and the chaplains posed for a picture with Representative Hussein at the end of the night.

There were also supportive community leaders—from the military, police department, the sheriff's office, and other politicians.

After the meal, Representative Hussein shared that ***“Ramadan is a time for self-reflection, compassion, and gratitude. It reminds us of the importance of giving, serving others, and strengthening our bonds as a community.”***

This doesn't sound radically different from our beliefs as ELCA Lutherans, does it? Aren't those the values we would WANT to hear from our neighbors???

In fact, during Lent, this time set apart in preparation for Easter, we have a very similar goal. The ELCA provides guidance on why Lent is so important.

Lent reminds us that God is not yet through with us or our world. We know by faith that God is even now at work, drawing us toward the resurrection and restoration of the world. We bear witness to [God] with partners, companions, friends and neighbors. ~elca.org

How does Jesus prepare us to do that?

We don't have to look much further than our two very interesting stories told back-to-back.

The first story provides an enlightening response from Jesus.

Life happens—whether it's evil being inflicted upon us or others, like the Galileans who are tortured and presumably killed by Pilate. Or if it's manmade failures—like a tower falling over and killing bystanders.

Jesus says, **“do you think that they were worse offenders than all the other people living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you,**

But... there's a but. This isn't a lesson on why bad things happen to good people. Jesus doesn't help us solve the universal question we're all wanting to know: why does suffering happen?

In fact, Jesus essentially squelches any notion that God is a puppet-master in the sky choosing life and death. Thank God.

Sermon Transcript

Life happens. Suffering happens.

I've been there before—when our son, Oliver, was first diagnosed as being severely disabled, I spent a lot of time asking why. And fielding questions from people, some who knew better, who believe the world to be like those who questioned Jesus—what did I do to cause this? What prayer could reverse this? That's a hard place to get out of.

When our faith community witnessed loved ones who've died tragically, like Cullen, or Richard and Jeanette Hahn, or Meg Maurer, we plead with God. How does this make sense?

When atrocities infect our entire world, like the rise of evil from Hitler to Putin, and countless people killed or displaced, we want a reason. We want to see God intervene.

Yet, it's with us. That's where God intervenes.

That's the "but". But without repentance, we are dying while we live. We are just aimless. Without God.

But WITH God, we repent. Living with God, we can't control evil. We can, however, reduce the power that evil has over us.

In Luke, repentance is not primarily about contrition and reformed behavior. To repent, instead, is to adopt a new way of thinking, to take on a new or renewed disposition toward God.

What does a repentant life look like? How do I make this u-turn???

We get a parable. A fig tree is barren, and the owner is ready to chop it down. The worker, however, makes a plea. Give it more time. Another chance.

Where are we in this parable? We are the tree. And God is the gardener. Just like last week—we are in the ditch and God is the Samaritan.

Richard Jensen says,

Repentance is not a fruit problem; it is a root problem. It is the root of who we are that is a problem in God's eyes. So repentance cannot be composed of "I can" statements. "I have sinned God. I am sorry God. I can do better."

Sermon Transcript

Repentance, rather, must be composed of “I can’t” statements. “I have sinned, God. I am sorry. God, I’ve tried and tried and tried but I just don’t produce good fruit. *I can’t seem to do better.* I need your Vinedresser to work on the roots of my life. Give me a new life, God. Give me your life. I can’t.

You can.

This is about surrender. Vulnerability.

And in that state, we can finally experience new life. Like the baby chicks that the kids held this morning. This reminds us of the unlimited potential that Jesus sees in us.

With this new life, we hold the power to focus our energy towards making a change in our hearts. We can use our voice to speak truth to injustice. We can use our influence to join others to stop intolerance.

I might not be able to convince everyone to follow this way of life.

But... I’ve invited Muslim speakers to church before and had one man tell me how much it changed his deeply held negative stereotypes.

Why did I share about my experience this week? Is it possible that a few of you might just look at your neighbors differently? The way we treat people of other faiths says a lot about the way we practice our own faith.

Put the ax down. We’re not chopping the fig tree down anytime soon.

The God of second chances has more fruit to produce among us. God keeps taking chances on us. ***Start to walk towards the band.*** Repent, U-turn, and return to the waiting branches of God’s abundant grace. Amen.