

God Moves... Over the Fence

Part 3 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 13:1-9

and delivered on

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at

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What would you think if I were to tell you that sometime the grass really is greener on the other side of the fence? Sometimes it is. When I served the church in Mount Carroll, the parsonage sat between two homes with these perfectly manicured lawns. My yard – the parsonage yard – was half dirt (the church had just done some remodeling and had brought in dirt so that water would drain away from the house instead of flowing straight to the basement.) The backyard too, was a quarter to a third dirt. The pine trees in the back shaded out so much that grass couldn't grow. But on either side of me. Wow!

It didn't take long (maybe a month) after I'd moved in for grass to cover the front lawn. The Trustees had spread grass seed; and I had watered it diligently. The seed in the back didn't fare quite as well. Nonetheless, there was a lawn.

But even then... Keeping a pastor's work schedule (at that time a single pastor's schedule), I didn't have much free time to push that old push mower around the lawn. And when I say "old," I mean that every second or third time I'd use it I would have to do some sort of repair whether finding a clog in the fuel line, managing a wonky wheel, or trying to get that blasted pull rope starter assembled again. Then there were all those "glorious" {sarcasm} birch branches to pick up. (There were two large river birch and three large white birch trees on the property).

Let's just say that sometimes the lawn got a bit shaggy. But not my neighbors'. Theirs were always – and I mean always – nicely trimmed... and so green. My lawn didn't have that vibrant green. Although it was often bespeckled with some vibrant yellow flowers. The neighbors didn't have that, even when those flowers would poof up to spread their "joy" with every poof of a summer breeze.¹ Of course the white clover was there to add another layer of "consistnancy". The neighbors didn't have that.

So, here's my paradox. When I was pondering an example to talk about the Gospel lesson, today, that story about the lawn is what came to mind. Except that, in many ways, it's exactly the opposite of what was happening in the Gospel lesson.

In the Gospel, people have told Jesus that some people had been killed by Pilate. Jesus question, "Do you think...?" really means "I know that you think that they must have deserved it, just like those upon whom that tower fell." That was the understanding back then, and too an extent now. We've got this perspective that everything is supposed to be "fair", so we look for ways to find blame for those who suffer. Sometimes we do so without even meaning to. Several years ago, my cousin died in a car accident. As the first born grandchild and a pastor, I got the "privilege" of giving our grandmother the news. That meant that I had to leave my church responsibilities in the morning to head down to Peoria, and then back for a church supper that night. One of the members offered me sympathy, saying she was sorry to hear about my cousin. But then she asked, "Was she wearing her seatbelt?" This is not the sort of question you should ask when someone is grieving especially when it's fresh. I just looked at her and said, "She's dead," and left it at that. But we do that.

Franklin has lung cancer. Did he smoke? Clarisse has diabetes. Is she an overeater? Chet just got laid off. Wasn't he doing a good enough job? Marissa's boy just got picked up for vandalism. Shouldn't she have stayed at home instead of getting a job? It wouldn't even matter if the vandalism was TP-ing a friend's home before graduation. It wouldn't matter if Chet's employer had gone out of business. It wouldn't matter if Clarisse (like my cousin Rodney) had grown up with juvenile diabetes. It wouldn't matter that Franklin had never put a cigarette to his lips, but that (as a truck driver) he'd been exposed to copious amounts of diesel exhaust. We look for blame.

And maybe that's why it can be so hard to come to terms with our own struggles. So we can be tempted to divert attention to others. But Jesus asks, "Why do you see the speck in your

¹ Here I am referring to dandelions, sarcastically noting the irony of their beauty and perceived ugliness.

neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" (Mt 7:3, Lk 6:41). Of course right before asking that, Jesus says, "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get." (Mt 7:1-2) It's sort of like what I pointed out on Ash Wednesday. It's easy to see the ashes on everyone else's forehead, how dirty they are. But to see our own means looking in the mirror.

I don't believe Jesus expects us to ignore others' sins. I really don't we couldn't be decent parents if we never corrected our children. But what he's calling us to do is to look first at our own lives so that we can be useful. Jesus also said, "Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment." (Jn 7:24) Even as he says of himself, "I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world." (Jn 12:47) That is his goal isn't judgement for the sake of condemnation, but direction to bring hope.

So he tells a story about how to get to the "root" of things. The gardener pleads to have more time on behalf of the fig tree, to dig down around the roots – to dig down to what's not readily seen or obvious and to heal that and to provide nourishment there; and then to let it thrive or perish.

What good would it have done to just compare the failing fig tree with the others nearby? Did it make the fig trees who were thriving thrive better because one was failing? But that is often our temptation.

We tend to look at what's happening in other lives either to gloat and to take satisfaction that by not being as bad we're better. Or we covet and become jealous turning away from God, as Israel did when they pleaded with Samuel to give them a king like all the other countries have. (1 Sam 8:5) Now part of that was because Samuel's sons were not particularly stellar human beings. My point is that they looked outward at others to get what seemed better to get to that greener pasture, ignoring Samuel's warning about what having a king would actually mean.

But this is what Jesus offers: he tells us that if we're willing and dare confront those things that are destroying us, that he will heal us. Think about that. He asks us to confront our sin so that we can be healthy, instead of wishing if I only had it like Judd next door.

There was a reason Judd and the other neighbor had such lush lawns. They were both retired. They had time to mow their lawns three – four – five times a week (and I'm not exaggerating) and to do so on their riding lawn mowers. They had time spread fertilizer and weed killer (even though you don't need as much herbicide when the grass is well fed). The grass was greener because they were working their lawns.

It took time. I recruited trustees to lift the canopy of the pine trees. I spent a summer chopping out the eight stumps of trees that had been cut before I arrived. I watered. I planted flowers, I pushed for a new mower. The lawn never got quite as good as those on either side, but it was getting better and if not thriving then it was growing and getting there.

When God moves over the fence, it isn't to take us to greener pastures, but to bring us back to who we are so that we can discover the fullness of life that he has for us, so that we might see ourselves as he intends for you and for me to see ourselves as made in his image – and his image alone – not in comparison or competition with anyone else. That means tending to our own needs and our own failures, and taking time to get at the root of what tempts us. And to do so free from shame – knowing that God wants more than anything else in the world to heal us and to save us from ourselves. We have the cross to prove that. Even though the time to claim his grace isn't unlimited, he is generous in his mercy and liberal in his passion for each of us.

AMEN.