

GOD'S VISION FOR THE CITY

LUKE 13:31-35

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There is a powerful scene in the Studio Arena play *A Lesson Before Dying*. The main character, Grant, an African-American school teacher, raised in the same poor rural parish in Louisiana where he now teaches in a one-room school house...finally wrestles with the inner demons who want him to leave the parish. The demons of successful, easy living tempting him to go to the big city, to Detroit or Chicago or L.A.

Both his school teacher girl friend, and the condemned man in prison whom

Grant is recruited by the man's godmother to teach, help him decide to stay.

When he makes this decision Grant is not only transformed, he helps transform those around him – the condemned man and those school kids.

There is something of a parallel scene in Nicholas Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Jesus is walking along in the desert, really wanting to spend his life in a monastery praying, secluded and alone with God, safe and comfortable in the cloister.

Only, of course, God has different plans for him. So to get his attention,

God sends eagles down to wrap their talons around Jesus' heart.

The eagles grip him so that he falls to the sand in pain.

I think that is what happened to Grant. Something gripped his heart.

The talons of injustice, the talons of prejudice and racism. His heart-felt pain is what made him stay in the prison and teach Jefferson, and to teach the children.

Like *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Last Temptation of Christ*, Luke's story today of Jesus heading for the city, making his way to Jerusalem is a story about choosing to stay or leave...choosing to be present or absent to the suffering and injustice around him.

It is interesting that the Pharisees who stop Jesus on his way to Jerusalem and tell him "to get away from here because Herod wants to kill you," are also described elsewhere as Jesus' adversaries. The biblical word 'adversary' means "one who places an obstacle in your way." I say it is interesting because these Pharisees out of their "concern" for Jesus place an obstacle in his way. They are adversaries.

They place the idea of danger in Jesus' way to get him to avoid the city.

But Jesus refuses their warning, has no intention of not going to the city.

And as prophets sometimes do even has a notion he will die there.

Then, in a haunting lament, he says this, he says, "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."

We're talking this Lent about the outward journey of faith. What we say and do for Jesus. I want us to consider today our decision to stay in and minister to this city. To Buffalo.

Like Jesus and Grant we face obstacles in our way. We're tempted not to go there.

But God has other plans for us.

Now you might be asking yourself, “What is he talking about? Haven’t we already made it clear we want to be in this city and minister to it?”

We renovated this sanctuary in the early 90s to the tune of a million dollars. You don’t do that if you’re planning on pulling up stakes. We started the Ferguson Avenue Building Block program four years ago and tutor dozens of children from that West Side neighborhood twice a week. We’ve formed a most successful church partnership with Habitat for Humanity. We’re working on our fourth house on Ferguson Avenue in as many years. We support over a dozen city social service ministries and agencies.

There is no question we want to be in this city!

One of the core values of Westminster – a core value that was clear to me when I interviewed for the senior pastor position, a core value that was boldly identified in our visioning process among our focus groups – is our commitment to this city.

Some even asked if Westminster could be Westminster if we were not in the city.

If we were anywhere but the city, whatever it was, it would not be Westminster.

So my comments today are not aimed at getting us to take the first step.

We’ve done that and more. Rather I want us to reflect today on what it might be like to go deeper with our commitment to minister to Buffalo.

When Jesus decided to go to the city, to Jerusalem, he knew he was going to the seat of power. He also knew that he was not welcome there. That he would be rejected.

It did not take a Ph.D. in organizational behavior for him to figure this out.

The Pharisees had already put Jesus on notice. Herod is out to get you, they said.

Besides, if you were a prophet, Jerusalem, as Jesus says in his lament, was not a particularly healthy place to be living.

I don’t think you can live at the vortex of those forces, of self-centered living and other-directed living, between centripetal and centrifugal power like that and not realize that somebody could very easily get hurt.

And so the question ever since Jesus made his way into the city two millennia ago is, “what does God want us to do there?”

Over the centuries the church has answered that question in three ways, says theologian John Howard Yoder. The *activist church* says that God wants us to build a better city, rather than so much a better church. God is at work behind movements for social change. The hope is that Christians will join in such movements wherever they find them...making over the systems of society.

If the approach of the activist church is outward, *the conversionist church* looks inward. No amount of tinkering with social structures can counter the effects of sin. The only way to deal once and for all with sin is through personal conversion to new awareness and living. Social movements try to bypass personal transformation. The soul of the believer is what matters.

But *the confessing church* says the main task of the church lies not in the personal transformation of individual hearts or the modification of society but rather in the congregation’s determination to worship Christ in all things.¹

What I am proposing today, as we begin this new millennium of ministry, is for Westminster to embrace the work of the confessing church. To worship Christ in all things. To be a visible sign to the world where people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the poor, suffer for righteousness, and testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.

The confessing church moves beyond the activist church's acceptance of the culture with a few qualifications and beyond the conversionist church's rejection of culture with few exceptions. The confessing church believes the most credible witness is the actual creation of a living, breathing, visible community of faith.

The symbol of the confessing church is the cross – not as a passive sign of suffering submission to the powers that be, but a sign of the church's revolutionary participation in the victory of Christ over those powers.

What does all this have to do with the city? Let's put it another way. Joanna Macy says "the heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe." That's the community I'm talking about. When Grant's heart breaks open in *A Lesson Before Dying* he decides to stay in poor Louisiana. When Jesus' heart breaks open and he says "how often I would have gathered your children like a mother hen" and sets his face toward Jerusalem – that's community. When your heart breaks open through some loss or grief or pain the seed of community is planted in your soul.

I remember a particularly dark time in my life. A time when I did not know which way to turn or where an answer might be to the questions that were burrowing into my soul. What happened was in my stumbling from place to place moving through the day the kindness of friends and strangers broke my heart open.

Little kindnesses. Not big fancy immortal answers like I thought I needed.

But literally moments and gestures of human compassion, of Christly community.

The great African-American preacher Gardner Taylor once said, "the pain of the pilgrim is his or her passport into the hearts of people." It is in our own woundedness Henri Nouwen used to say that we reach out to heal others. God works through people helping people. When you reach out to touch the life of someone in pain or someone reaches out to touch your life – that is a moment of Christly community. That day others reached out to me every person I saw was to me a brother or sister with some story of joy or sorrow. Not just someone else taking up space in this city where I live.

What I am saying is our hearts need to break open like Christ's heart so that we gather this whole city into our embrace. But, folks, even though there are many we do serve, there are some groups of people, some circumstances of need, we remain blind to.

Today's story calls us to resist the temptation of the adversary. It is tempting to say that we have given and suffered so much on behalf of this city. It is tempting to ease away from the talons of human suffering. But we are being called today to allow our hearts to break, to widen the circle Christ here at Westminster.

There are two groups I believe we need to embrace as soon as possible.

The thousands of neighbors within a quarter mile radius of this sanctuary; and the families and neighborhoods suffering the scourge of violence on Buffalo's East Side.

Did you ever notice how many apartment buildings surround this church? On Delaware and Elmwood Avenues. On North and Summer Streets?

There are hundreds of people. Senior citizens, young singles, single parents and children within three minutes of this sanctuary. Some of you have told me you've wondered as I do why more of them aren't here on Sunday. What an irony it is that we do not know the literal neighbors of this church?

Isn't it time we reach out to them? Find out who they are. Invite them into the family of Christ here.

The other group that concerns me today – and harder to relate to – are the East Side neighborhoods where violence rules. I know many of you were saddened, as I was, to read the headlines this past Thursday. Such is the despair in the poor black community that blacks killing blacks in senseless, bursts of outrage and frustration.

NAACP president Frank Messiah says this issue is a non-issue for whites because white people do not feel the impact of crime on the East Side. There may be some truth to that. But more to the point is, I believe, finding a way to affect a solution. Mr. Messiah also says the power-structure in Buffalo has to make this problem a top priority. The business community, the bankers, the church have to help put an end to blacks killing blacks he said.

That's hard to disagree with. But again the question is "How?" One of the things I learned in our racial justice workshop here at Westminster last Sunday was that those who have privilege are unaware of the advantage it gives them. Our challenge in response to the East Side is to find ways to use our privilege to help end the violence in the black community. I have no blueprints. But given the heart and talent of this congregation I know we could help find a way and I believe God is calling us to do so.

When Jesus said he longed to take the children of the city under his wing like a mother hen he gave city churches for all time a vision of what God wants us to do.

We are the body of Christ in Buffalo. If the killing of children by children on the East Side does not break our hearts nothing will.

The adversary tempts us with what is comfortable, easy and familiar. It's not our problem. Don't rock the boat. It's too complicated.

But we are called today to extend the living, breathing community of faith that gives us life and hope to our brothers and sisters across the street and East Side mothers and fathers who grieve their dead teenage boys and young adult sons.

It's time friends to gather in more of the people and pain of this city.

Even if it means changing some old patterns and perceptions to do it.
Amen.

¹ John Howard Yoder ("A People in the World: Theological Interpretation," in The Concept of the Believer's Church, James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1969) pp 252-283.