

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
Lent 3 (C) ~ 23 March 2025  
St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Bethesda  
Exodus 3:1-15  
Psalm 63:1-8  
Luke 13:1-9

***Grace is not transactional***

I'm afraid I must ask you to indulge me in a bit of a rant this morning. If you've been around St. Dunstan's for a while, you likely have heard me opine on this topic before, because it's a particular pet peeve of mine. My goal in sharing it today is to make it one of yours, too.

For most of my life I have been an inveterate morning news junkie, but recently – for reasons I'm sure you understand – I haven't been able to bring myself to turn it on. It used to be part of my regular routine, as I had my coffee and got ready for work. But these days I prefer silence over that noise; it just seems to corrode my soul.

Yet I still need to be informed, and that's where I get myself in trouble.

The other day I broke down and switched on the television for just a moment – probably to check the weather or traffic report – but instead I caught the tail-end of one of those “filler” conversations between the anchors, when clearly the producers were shouting in their earpieces, “vamp until the commercial break!” I couldn't tell you what they were talking about, but I do know that they were chatting about someone they hire to provide a service. Tax accountant? Dog groomer? Nail salon?

No clue.

Here's the point: One of the anchors – innocently enough – happened to say, *Well, I use so-and so...*

And that's all it took to set me off. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

*I use \_\_\_\_\_.*

It's a common enough expression, right? I'm sure we've all heard – and said – it before. I know that I have myself, so I'm not judging. But that brief exchange was a reminder, yet again, of how in our society it seems perfectly acceptable to speak of “using” people to fulfill our own needs – whether it be to prepare our 1040's or trim our pup's nails.

And that's precisely the problem. Because language matters.

Maybe you think I'm overreacting. It wouldn't be the first time I've faced such an accusation.

But hear me out, please.

I would argue that this *instrumental*, transactional way in which we tend to regard other human beings is the root cause – or at least very near to the root – of what is wrong with our world. We have a remarkable capacity to exploit and discount one another.

And I'm not talking about long-ago history, the distant past: No, I mean in 2025, in the United States of America. This very day, in this very place – we still value people according to what they can do for us, what they are able to contribute.

And that's terrifying.

If you don't believe me, just turn on the news.

When we objectify others – literally making them the objects of our verbs (*I use so-and-so...*) – we strip them of their very humanity.

And frankly, I believe that is one of the most heinous things we can do.

People *know* when they are being used – don't we?

So much for respecting the dignity of every human being.

We've seen so much of this recently, as people we know and love are losing their jobs, losing their livelihoods, losing their hopes for the future, all in the name of so-called productivity and efficiency.

We are witnessing, firsthand, the pain caused by an instrumental, transactional worldview.

And it is precisely this worldview that Jesus calls into question in today's Gospel.

In the midst of a conversation about sin and punishment, Jesus tells the parable of the barren fig tree, turning His listeners' expectations upside-down. The owner of the tree, exasperated at its lack of productivity, demands that it be destroyed. But the gardener – Whom we can take to be Jesus Himself – explodes this productivity economy in favor of mercy. *Give it time*, He says. *Nurture the tree. Tend it. Love it. Invest in it. Shower it with grace.*

And then stand back, wait, and watch what happens.

The tree's value is not bound up in whether or not it "wastes the soil." Rather, the Gardener longs to care for it, giving it every opportunity to flourish under His hand. If it still doesn't thrive after all that, then – and only then – can it be cut down.

But it seems pretty clear which way Jesus expects the story to go.

Now, it has to be said: People are not trees. (Aren't you glad that I know that?) We have to beware of assuming a one-to-one correspondence between the fruitless fig and a human being. Be cautious about interpreting this parable to mean that any person should be "cut down."

That's not what Jesus is saying here. I would stake my soul on it.

On the contrary: Jesus is painting a vivid picture of the disparity between the way of the world, on the one hand, and the way of God, on the other. Whereas we humans do tend to see others according to what they can do for us, according to a transactional economy, God sees us as God's own beloved. Whereas the world operates according to what we "deserve," God operates according to grace.

And grace is not transactional.

This morning we also heard the story of Moses and his iconic encounter with God in the burning bush. I will tell you that, as a preacher, sometimes I struggle to figure out what in the world the lesson from Hebrew Scripture has to do with the Gospel reading, but not today. Today the connection seems pretty clear, as God calls Moses, as God beckons him into service, as God gives him another chance.

Now, it's worth pausing for a second to remind ourselves of who Moses is. Born to an Israelite woman enslaved in Egypt, as an infant Moses was placed in a reed basket in the Nile River to be protected from the wrath of Pharaoh. Remember that Pharaoh's own daughter found the baby, drew him from the water, and raised him as her son in the royal household.

But Moses always knew who he really was, and one day as he observed an Egyptian overseer beating an Israelite slave, he snapped: In a fit of rage Moses killed the Egyptian, and he wound up fleeing in fear to the land of Midian. There Moses met Jethro and his daughter Zipporah, whom he married, and he eventually began a new life.

And it is here in Midian, tending Jethro's sheep, that Moses meets God at Mount Horeb, in a bush that burns, but is not consumed. In the midst of his daily existence, Moses – the murderer, the man on the run – meets the God of the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Moses hides his face, because he is afraid to look at God.

Of course he is. Moses knows who he is and what he has done, and he has been trying to hide from that reality for years – decades, in fact. He is no doubt deeply ashamed and terrified. He knows what fate he deserves.

But the story goes on:

God tells Moses to remove his sandals because the “place where [he is] standing is holy ground.” *Take off your shoes, Moses*, God says. *You are in the presence of the Almighty.*

One way to understand this command is to hear God sounding an awful lot like a scolding parent: “Show some respect, why don’t you! Take those filthy shoes off in My house! Don’t you know where those things have been?” Perhaps that is the way many of us are accustomed to hearing these words.

But here is another possibility:

What if what God is *really* saying is, “Come a little closer, Moses. Take off your shoes, sink your feet into this ground, and feel the dirt between your toes. Don’t let anything come between you and the holy. Don’t let anything come between you and Me”?

After all, what are sandals, or shoes of any kind for, if not protection? We strap leather to the soles of our feet to shield ourselves from the grime of the world. Shoes provide a barrier between us and whatever contaminants lurk on the physical plane. But when we are standing on *holy* ground, we need no protection. Is it possible that God is asking for a direct and personal point of contact with Moses, with no barrier between them?

How might that change things?

The 19<sup>th</sup>-century German Rabbi, S.R. Hirsch, put it this way:

taking off one’s shoes expressed giving oneself up entirely to the meaning

of a place, to let your personality get its standing and take up its position entirely and directly on it without any intermediary.<sup>1</sup>

It's that last phrase – “without any intermediary” – on which I want to linger for a moment. For Moses to take off his shoes, Hirsch suggests, is to have an intimate, sensory experience of the Divine. It is to be fully present to and aware of God.

It is for Moses to plunge his toes into the ground, into the very source of existence, and experience God, up close and personal. It is to experience forgiveness and grace.

And grace is not transactional.

Does Moses “deserve” this encounter with God? Has he done anything to merit being called into God's service?

Not so much.

“Who am I,” he asks, “that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

Who is he, indeed?

A flawed, fallible child of God, just like you and I.

Nevertheless, he is called to stand on holy ground, to come into the presence of the Divine, and to do the seemingly impossible.

God see Moses, in all of his “less-than-ness” (less holy, less pure, less faithful, less *fruitful*) and showers him with grace. God says “I will be with you” – and “*when* you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (*emphasis mine*).

---

<sup>1</sup> "Take Off Your Shoes"

Not if. When.

It seems pretty clear which way God expects Moses' story to go.

And it seems pretty clear which way God expects – hopes, dreams – our story to go, too.

You may have heard the old saying, “God loves us just as we are, but God loves us too much to leave us that way.” I’m inclined to replace that “but” with “and,” because the two halves of that sentence – “God loves us just as we are,” and “God loves too much to leave us that way” – are not at all in contradiction. They are not mutually exclusive. Both things are true, simultaneously: God loves us, *and* God wants more for us. Or, as the writer Anne Lamott puts it: “I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”<sup>2</sup>

*Grace meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.*

And remember, beloved, flawed, fallible children of God: Grace is not transactional.

*Amen.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon, 1999).