



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road
roswell, georgia 30076

04-Mar-2007

SCRIPTURE: Isaiah 55:1-9 Luke 13:1-9

SERMON: Accept No Substitutes! (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)

I wonder how we really think about Lent given its overtones: giving things up, not enjoying ourselves, facing up to our sins, trying to do better. Is there any good news for us in Lent to bear us up or is their only a downside? To help us ...

A WEEK AT THE GYM: ONE MAN'S STORY

Dear Diary: For my 65th birthday this year, my wife (the dear) purchased a week of personal training at the local health club for me. Although still in shape since playing on my college tennis team, I decided I would go ahead and give it a try. I called and made my reservation with a personal trainer, Belinda. She identified herself as a 26-year-old aerobics instructor and model for athletic clothing and swimwear. My wife was pleased with my enthusiasm. The club encouraged me to keep a diary to chart my progress.

Monday:

Started my day at 6:00 a.m. Tough to get out of bed, but it was well worth it when I met Belinda. She is like a Greek goddess, blond, dancing eyes, a great smile. Belinda gave me a tour and showed me the machines. After five minutes on the treadmill, she noted my pulse was way fast. I attribute it to standing next to her. Belinda was encouraging as I did my sit-ups, although my gut was already aching from holding it in the whole time she was around. This is going to be a *fantastic* week!!

Tuesday:

I drank a whole pot of coffee, but I finally made it out the door. Belinda made me lie on my back and push a heavy iron bar into the air -- then she put weights on it! My legs were a little wobbly on the treadmill, but I made the full mile. Belinda's rewarding smile made it all worthwhile. I feel *great*!! It's a whole new life for me.

Wednesday:

The only way I can brush my teeth is by lying the toothbrush on the counter and moving my mouth back and forth over it. I think I have a hernia. Driving was okay as long as I didn't try to steer or stop. I parked on top of a Geo in the club lot. Belinda was impatient. She said my screams were bothering other club members. Her voice is a little too perky for early in the morning, and when she scolds, she has this nasally whiny annoying voice. My chest hurt on the treadmill, so Belinda put me on the stair monster. Who would invent a machine to simulate an activity rendered obsolete by elevators? Belinda told me some nonsense that it was good for me.

Thursday:

Belinda was waiting for me with her vampire-like teeth exposed as her thin, cruel lips were pulled back in a full snarl. I couldn't help being a half an hour late; it took me that long to tie my shoes. Belinda led me to the dumbbells. When she was not looking, I ran and hid in the men's room. She sent Lars to find me. Then, as punishment, she put me on the rowing machine -- which I sank.

Friday:

I hate that Belinda more than any human being has ever hated any other human being in the history of the world. Stupid, skinny, anemic cheerleader. If there was a part of my body I could move without unbearable pain, I would beat her with it. Belinda wanted me to work on my triceps. *I don't have any triceps!* And if you don't want dents in the floor, don't hand me the barbells or anything heavier than a sandwich. The treadmill flung me off and I landed on a health and nutrition teacher.

Saturday:

She, Belinda, left a message on my answering machine in her grating, shrilly voice wondering why I did not show up today. Just hearing her made me want to smash it. However, lacking the strength to use even the TV remote, I caught 11 straight hours of the Weather Channel.

Sunday:

I'm having the church van can pick me up for services today so I can go and thank the Lord that this week is over. I will also pray that next year my wife (what an idiot) will choose a gift for me that is fun -- *like a root canal*.

Now to be fair, dentists claim that root canals get a bad rap!

The wrong approach to Lent would be to view it as a hideous, unbearable burden. If we see Lent only as a time to be ever yet more aware of ways in which we fail, while not discovering at the same time any experience of God's Good News, it would be an intolerable burden, something to avoid at all cost, or to skate through as quickly as possible. *Thank you for the ashes, please pass me the Easter Lilly.*

Today, I want you to know and receive and accept Good News, the Good News of Love, Hope and Forgiveness that God offers us even in Lent. And in this discovery to move into a new way of trusting and believing and following Jesus Christ. This Good News, the Good News that God has for us this Lent, is expressed very well in Jesus' little parable of the fig tree that was saved and given another chance. Though it had failed to be fruitful, the gardener, the one who loved it and tended it believed in it enough to convince his employer, the tree's owner, to give it one more chance, one more year, one more opportunity to do what he believed it would do: *produce its fruit*.

The significance of this parable, the sheer grace offered in this second chance and the extent of the emotions involved came home to me this past week in a report I heard on National Public Radio. The report provided an update on the life of Calvin Crawford Johnson Jr. In 1983, Johnson was sentenced to life in prison for a rape and burglary, crimes he always said he did not commit. "With God as my witness, I have been falsely accused of these crimes," Johnson said. "I'm an innocent man, and I pray in the name of Jesus Christ that the truth will eventually be brought out." Sixteen years later, in 1999, Calvin walked out of the same Clayton County courthouse a free man after DNA evidence proved conclusively he had not committed the crime.

Until the recent case in which another Georgia man, Pete Williams, was officially exonerated after serving nearly 22 years in prison, Johnston's 16 years had been the longest prison term served by someone subsequently freed by DNA evidence. Nationally, 195 people have been cleared of crimes for which they had served time.

Today Calvin Johnson, who was a college graduate from his before his incarceration, works as a MARTA Supervisor. "Everything is new," says Johnson. "I mean, you come out, and it's a big world. Sometimes, you just want to look. You catch yourself just looking at everything, just watching people, actions, how to dress... just to see what's going on around you." Johnson is so thrilled with his job and with his new life that he smiles almost constantly. He says he has a lot to smile about, helped by strong family support and his college education. "I have a steady job. I'm a homeowner. I have a lovely wife. I have a daughter. I have a little dog that wags his tail," he says. "Basically, you could say I'm living the American dream." *What a second chance!* What a turnaround for this man who had done nothing wrong to deserve 16 years in prison, including time in hard labor! What a great attitude he demonstrates as he gets about living his now free, fruitful life.

Jesus' little parable of the fig tree that was spared convinces me that Jesus would intervene for the Calvin Johnston's of the world, those wrongly accused, incorrectly labeled, denied justice, held without due process. But the radical nature of this parable pushes the envelope even further. Because unlike Calvin Johnston, this little tree had done something wrong, it had failed to do the one thing it was raised to do: *it had failed to produce any fruit*. Yet despite this record, despite its failure, the gardener still intervened, and this failed, failing tree was granted a second chance, a new beginning.

This new beginning, this second chance, *is an offer to all of us from God*. We are given the opportunity to do our repenting, to turn aside from doing our own thing so we can accept all that God has done and is doing and will do in our lives. Jesus message began, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." In our society, therapists serve as priests, guilt is explained away, repentance is replaced by the spurious claims of the self-help gospel. In response, the church must speak and act its Good News: that our merciful God welcomes back repentant sinners. We need to be quick to recognize and identify that the promises of cheap grace offered by new age gurus and self-help advocates are "not the bread that sustains." God's message and relationship with people is good news precisely because it begins with the acceptance of the news that we are sinners in need of repentance and that we have a God willing, ready and able to forgive. So, *sad news and bad news or Good News and Great News is the question*.

Sad and bad because we must be open, honest, truthful in acknowledging our complete and utter failure to be the people God needs us to be or even the people that we think we should be ourselves. Good and great news because our God offers us as we repent a second chance, a starting over, a beginning again. This, my friends, is how God chooses to relate with us and to us, and open us to a new relationship, a new friendship. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I can't stop... I can't stop drinking, I can't stop taking extra painkillers, I can't kick the habit. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say my life goes on well for a while but then an old jealousy leads me to say bad things about good people or an old grudge taints my attitude to someone in my family or in my church. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I am just too bad, too far gone. I have let God down, I have let my family down, I have let myself down too many times, in some terrible ways... why would God bother about me? Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I'm a good person, I never do anything bad, I always try to help others... maybe I don't need forgiven. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I was a very faithful Christian ... once. I was heart and soul, like some of the people I see helping and working around this church but I abandoned that life and took a back seat. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I'm looking for a new or renewed experience of faith or a new direction to move me forward in life. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Maybe you say I've screwed up royally... for years I've known what I needed to do but I never could live that way. Jesus Christ is asking that you be given another opportunity to discover how God's love can change your living. *Accept no substitutes!*

Whatever you say, whatever you think about yourself, about your life, about the Church, about God, about faith, about failures real and imagined, Jesus Christ loves you, *Jesus Christ loves the world*. So live anew! *Accept no substitutes! Amen.*

Isaiah 55:1-9

1Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. 9For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Luke 13:1-9

1At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. 4Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." 6Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. 7So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' 8He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. 9If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

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