

“Vision Problems” – Stephanie Wing, 3.7.10

How many of you know who Mr. Magoo is? If you're too young to know who that is, then you can look him up on YouTube. Mr. Magoo was a cartoon character who had one very notable problem - he could hardly see a thing! His extreme nearsightedness caused one hilarious misadventure after another. His refusal to recognize his own near-blindness added to the comedic value, as the audience and the other characters in his cartoons observed his major blunders that could have so easily been avoided with the right pair of glasses.

It is Mr. Magoo's stubbornness that makes him an easy target, but we aren't all that different, are we? We think we see and understand things pretty well, but our passage from Isaiah reminds us that God's thoughts are far from our thoughts, and God's ways far from our ways. We have a basic problem of perception. As a result, we spend our time toiling and working for the things that don't satisfy us, when God is ready to offer bread, milk, and wine at no cost. We either place too much value in the wrong things, or we place too much value on our own labor, rather than accepting God's true, life-sustaining gifts.

The real issues at hand in our readings today are repentance, judgment, and mercy. What is our perception of each of those things? Let's start with repentance. I don't know about you, but when I think of repentance, I think of "hellfire and brimstone" preachers. I think of the preacher man who is so worked

up that sweat pours down his red face as he implores, begs, and threatens any who listen: Repent, and be saved, or you shall perish in the eternal furnace of hell!

Many people come to faith in fear. They fear that God is an angry, wrathful, vengeful God just waiting to meet us on judgment day to give us our just desserts.

That leads us to judgment. Judgment is looking at the weight of evidence and deciding what is deserved - punishment, or reward? Judgment focuses attention on our actions. This is the Santa Claus view of God - he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, so.... (be good for goodness' sake!) My grandmother was recently talking about her parents, and how devout they were in their faith, but what a great burden it was, too. They had been converted to a Pentecostal faith by a preacher who preached all about judgment, and they lived in constant fear of being caught unaware on judgment day. My grandmother wishes they would have understood the good news of grace rather than living under constant fear of judgment.

That brings us to mercy. Mercy is forgiveness. It is undeserved. It is leniency. About a month before I graduated from high school, I got my first traffic ticket for running a stop sign. I was following a friend of mine out of a parking lot, and because of construction on the main road, we instead took a side street. The stop sign that we ran was not in a usual place - it was much further to the side, and lower than a traditional stop sign, and I simply didn't see it. She sailed through the

intersection and I followed. Unfortunately, we sailed right past two police cruisers, and we were both pulled over and ticketed. The cop who gave me my ticket was understanding, and when I went to appear before the traffic judge, he even brought Polaroid photos of the oddly positioned stop sign. I told my story to the judge, and he asked about me more about myself. He found out I was to be one of the class Valedictorians, and that I was college-bound in the fall. Then he said, "Consider this a learning experience and a graduation present," and he dismissed the ticket. That was mercy.

It was mercy, but all things considered, was my minor moving violation that big of a deal? The street was nearly deserted. Neither of us were driving recklessly, and no one was hurt. What if I had been drinking and driving, speeding through a school zone, and hit and killed an innocent bystander? What if the judge responded in the same way, "Consider this a learning experience and a graduation present" to that? That second scenario would be scandalizing, would it not? You see, we have very particular perceptions of different wrongs, shades of sin, and whether judgment or mercy is more deserved.

The question of what is deserved is at the heart of our Gospel reading from Luke. Jesus is in Jerusalem, where news is spreading that Pilate has put to death several Galilean Jews who had come to Jerusalem to make sacrifices in the Temple. We know from other historical documents that there were a number of

Jews sentenced to death for sedition or treason, and one of the most militant resistance leaders was Judas of Galilee. It was likely that these Galileans put to death were deemed guilty by association – bad luck because of their birthplace!

There is another situation, too. In a neighborhood of Jerusalem, a number of men were building a tower, when suddenly it collapsed and killed 18. In this kind of tragedy, we tend to ask questions. Why did that happen? Why does God allow that kind of death and devastation? We can understand these questions well, especially in light of the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile.

In Biblical times, it was often thought that if bad things happened to you or your household, it was a sign of God's displeasure, a sign of judgment for some sin you had committed. It's a worldview shared by cultures and religions across time and across the world, and truth be told, many people still believe that. Jesus uses the two situations to answer the questions that he knows are on everyone's mind. Were the Galileans who were put to death worse sinners than other Galileans who were allowed to live? What about those killed by the tower? Were they among the worst sinners in Jerusalem? Were those killed any more deserving of punishment and judgment than any others? Jesus responds emphatically, "No!"

It's the rest of Jesus' response that is more difficult to hear. "Unless you repent, you will all perish just like these did." There's the fire and brimstone - "Repent or perish!" With just a few words, Jesus reminds us that we are all in the

same boat - sinners who need to repent. But what does our perception tell us? We want to see ourselves as generally good people, admitting that we need God and that we are not perfect, but we're not all that bad, either. But do we really understand the gravity of our sin?

Sin is anything that separates us from God and from each other. If we understand that we were created to be united with Christ and bound to each other, then we can understand that our sin cuts away at that fabric of unity. It cuts from our flesh and it cuts from God's flesh. The Bible is clear that sin - any kind of sin - destroys life, and deserves judgment. That is hard to swallow.

But it isn't the final word, because God also offers mercy, pardon for sins, and complete forgiveness to all who ask. Isaiah invites the wicked to forsake their ways, and extends God's promise of abundant forgiveness. And Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree. This fig tree has gone three years without producing fruit. It is taking up space and resources, and it deserves to be cut down, but instead mercy is granted, and it is given yet another chance at life. Mercy.

Mercy is God's free and undeserved gift to us. Mercy is the bread and wine of life that God offers at no cost. But we must be willing to accept the gift, and to give up our own labor, which is in vain. How easy is it for us to give up our work, or to give up our sense of control over our lives? Mercy is a free gift, but it is not always easy to accept. As the fig tree, we have to be fertilized and cultivated.

That pruning can be painful. The fertilizer often stinks. Perhaps being cultivated is too humiliating, or requires us to give up too much of ourselves. But mercy requires us to give it up, to “let go and let God.”

In the season of Lent we are called to repent. Do we enter into repentance with our perception, or with God's perception? Do we see our sin for what it is, or do we tend to gloss over it? All of us have sinned, and all of us are called to repent. Or maybe we see our sin as too big and overwhelming to be forgiven. Are we able to let go of our perception and accept God's full and complete forgiveness? Or maybe we see the sins of others too quickly, and perhaps we are quick to judge and slow to forgive. Are we willing to let go of our judgment, and understand that we are all in the same boat - none more deserving of judgment or less covered by mercy? God's mercy is wider than our minds can comprehend.

We might be stuck in this life with our Mr. Magoo myopia, but we can recognize our shortcomings and rely on God to guide us through the journey. In our journey of repentance, let us not only repent our sin to God, but repent of the ways in which we hold so tightly to our own judgments and thoughts. Let us stop working so hard for what is of no real value, and instead let us open ourselves to receive God's free and abundant mercy. Let us stop worrying about the fruit of other trees, and instead humble ourselves to be cultivated and fertilized by Jesus Christ, that we may also produce good fruit, born of God's mercy and grace.