

The Rev. Ryan Fischer  
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
Second Sunday in Lent  
March, 13 2022

Lectionary Year C: Luke 13:31-35

In late-summer 2001, I had just returned from a year of study in Germany, and my Dad was getting ready for his retirement from American Crystal Sugar Company after thirty-eight years of service. When the day finally came to say goodbye, Dad had a few options as to how to celebrate. Now, remember, the age of lavish retirement parties had long passed by this time, and so a big fuss was not in order. So, in accordance with the options available to him, Dad's retirement was celebrated with a pizza party in the lower level of American Crystal's corporate office.

And I was there.

Lest we think that a pizza party in the Dilbert-esque confines of the corporate office's lower level is a bit chintzy for someone who devoted thirty-eight years of his life to the company, we needed only to ask the man himself. Dad thought it was just fine. This was, after all, a retirement party for a man whom I remember having a very good job and yet driving beat-up old pickups and doing his own mechanic work on the driveway in front of the house. This was the sort of lack of pretension that has served me, of all people, very well.

The lesson is simple: Never let status, titles, power, or prestige go to your head! Add to that the very Christ-like principle of

coming not to be served but to serve, and you have the much-talked-about example of something called servant leadership. Whether Dad thought he deserved a fancier party is something I'll never know, but I'll always remember the fact that he never mentioned anything of the sort.

And that's what I'd like to explore further with you today -- deserving things as a feeling of entitlement versus humbly receiving what you are given out of sheer gratitude. Someday, I'll leave this parish -- and eventually retire, too -- and when the time comes, I would be well-advised to avoid self-indulgent reminiscing and retrospectives. It is, after all, the pizza party that inspires more respect in me than an over-the-top retirement bash. The latter is something that people may think they deserve, while the former is something that people may humbly receive.

As Jesus laments over Jerusalem, he finds a people who are not humbly receiving. In this morning's Gospel text, he says, "How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" (Luke 13:34). You see, there isn't even the slightest posture to suggest that God's own people -- the children of Abraham -- are grabbing on to God's life preserver of grace and mercy. Rather than humbly receiving these gifts of God, they assume that they deserve them because they are God's people living in the center of the religious world at that time.

Deserving things plays in well to popular notions of entitlement,

which have been with us for forty years or better. Baby boomers usually get blamed for being self-centered, whiny, and entitlement-happy, but I think all generations can take a cue from ancient history. Arrogance before God got the Israelites into more trouble than violating any one of the 613 commandments in the Old Testament. And that arrogance is one that can both resist God and insist that one deserves something from him...

And that's why Jesus lamented over Jerusalem...

When God begins to fall out of the picture, we only want him around when he can give us something we think we deserve. Then we start expecting all of God's benefits but none of God's obligations. Never be under the impression that God's grace and mercy come cheap. They don't. Someone had to die so that we might have this grace and mercy. And so shouldn't we receive it with even a modicum of humility? This is the kind of attitude that reflects a genuine and true faith. We might all want to have a sense of that being "there."

This is all common sense, right? You don't want people wondering "Where was God?" when they leave this place. That's when the church just becomes another place where all we care about is keeping the offering plates full and the carpets clean. In a place without a living faith, that's what happens. Faith, which trusts in God, can very easily become cynicism, which expects things from God. Now we're back to entitlement!

There is good news, however. God does not give up! Remember what Jesus says -- "How often have I desired to gather your children together..." Well, this is still his desire. All we need is the humility to graciously receive what he has to offer us. Let God take charge and let yourselves be obedient to him.

Jesus is our example of how to conduct oneself with humility and without a sense of entitlement. We follow him during these forty days of Lent to the place where he will suffer and die for us. And that place is Jerusalem. Jesus' humility -- as well as his obedience -- is essential to his refusal to bypass this city where he will face his passion and death. He says, "And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'" (Luke 13:35). That "time" is when Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which the Church celebrates on Palm Sunday; we, too, await that day, and we pray that we may have even a fraction of the courage Jesus had as he faced what was to come his way.

And I know how our times leave us feeling rudderless and uncertain, but we need to be mindful of those things we can do something about...and those we can't! Thus, let God be in charge here, because it is only by God's guidance that we can endure through -- and find solutions in -- our times. Yes, that takes humility, but (trust me on this one) things work better when God is in charge than when we want to control what he can and can't do. The church body I used to belong to, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America, adopted the slogan "God's work, our hands," which applies very well to this matter. Think about it this way: We cannot allow "our hands" to screw up "God's work." A bit of self-restraint will go a long way in that department...

As you know, this is not my time to retire, but to continue. I will serve St. Anne's for as long as we mutually agree to support and care for one another in accordance with the Gospel. And together, we have plenty of opportunities as identified by the Vestry and the entire congregation at one time or another, which are doors to deeper connection and better service among our people. And with faith, I can only say that doors always open, provided we're "open" to God being our Lord in this life. We will neither be lost nor abandoned, because God will be there to guide us with his Holy Spirit toward his gifts of wisdom, grace, and mercy. Just be open to what God has in store!

Lastly, ask yourself if you deserve the big bash or if you're simply humbled by the notion that someone would throw a pizza party for you. Dad got by with the pizza party after thirty-eight (sometimes) not-so-wonderful years at American Crystal, and he was happy. And whenever the time comes for me to move on, be assured that a similarly modest celebration will suffice here, too! Let's have the humility to allow someone else to give us what we need, instead of the arrogance to only demand what we want. Then, we will see and be content with God's never-ending blessings.

Amen.