

Sermon – Lent 3 – St Luke and St Matthew Brooklyn

Luke 13: 1-9

Just after the founding of this nation Benjamin Franklin made the comment that the constitution “has an appearance that promises permanency, but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

This phrase might be amended today to say, “Nothing can be said to be certain except death.” Taxes seem like they are now optional, especially for those that can afford expert advice. I was amazed to read in the Economist Magazine recently that private jets are now fully tax deductible after the recent changes to the tax code. So taxes are indeed optional but death is not.

Lent is our time when death is very much front and center. It is a time for intentional self-reflection and consideration of our own mortality. I pray that you are taking time to do this reflection and to meditate upon these types of questions. Who am I? What am I doing with my life? How is my relationship with God? If I were to die today would I be ready? What would people say about me at my funeral?

Death may be a certainty for us but for many it is something far off and not to be discussed. Whole industries have been created dedicated to delaying or staving off death. Think of the health and fitness industry, the beauty and cosmetic industry and the health care and pharmaceutical industries.

We as consumers spend an awful lot of time and money participating in what these industries offer. I am certain it is more significant than the time and money we spend on making peace with death by reconciling with God and nurturing our spiritual lives.

Of course we are all susceptible to the cultural forces at work in the places we are raised and now live. When I was growing up in Australia the culture was very much British centric. By the time I left Australia, American cultural influences were completely reshaping the culture of Australia. Western cultures are very much consumer driven cultures.

Many non-western countries are now experiencing the same cultural shifts. As middle classes are being nurtured in countries such as China, India and Nigeria vast amounts of people are falling under the spell of consumerism. Print media, television and social media nurture desire because desire sells products and services.

Desire is not a new phenomenon at all. It has been a part of our human culture ever since Eve was convinced to eat the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. However the desire we feel today has its roots in the Classical Greek period from 2,500 years ago. This was the period where Greek philosophy was shaping thought, Greek designers were shaping buildings and Greek artists were creating sculptural forms that reflected exploration and deeper understandings of aesthetics and beauty.

A direct line can be drawn between Classical Greek sculptures of athletic males and today's health and fitness industry and the desire for a fit body. You may be familiar with the sculpture of the discus thrower by Myron. It is a perfect representation of the ideal male form we are told - powerful, athletic, flexible and in motion. It is held up as an example of three-dimensional Greek aesthetic philosophical thought around beauty. The sculptural form is perfect in balance, rhythm and harmony. It was thought that if one were beautiful in form then one would be virtuous, ethical and moral in behaviour.

A lot of how we see and experience the world today is influenced by these ancient principles and desire for beauty. We may well be enticed by the design of a beautiful car, or boat or airplane. Maybe it is a cultural icon, painting or piece of furniture. It all has been created to appeal to our senses.

An everyday example of these influences happens in the supermarket. Fruit and vegetables in Whole Foods are completely different from fruit and vegetables you'd see in a farmers market. The produce buyers at Whole Foods know we would rather select a banana without black spots or a carrot that is perfectly straight. They impose conditions on growers to develop these strains of food just to appeal to our sense of desire. The imperfect are discarded at the expense of the food insecure.

The irony is that the organic produce with all its flaws will taste a whole lot better than the produce that has been made to appear perfect to us.

What if there was a different way of seeing and experiencing the world around us. After all why should we think we know the only way? In our Ash Wednesday psalm there is a line that says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." For the psalmist this was a way of describing the vast distance between us and our sin once we accept God.

In times past eastern culture was completely alien to westerners and vice versa. They were far apart. What if we in the west turned to those in the east to teach us about living?

In Japanese culture there is an ancient concept called Wabi-Sabi. It roughly translates in English to a worldview centered on transience and imperfection. When I first learned about this ancient philosophy it made a great deal of sense to me. In Japan it informs a whole lot of life especially in terms of appreciating the natural environment, appreciating hand made items like ceramics and art like Ikebana flower arranging.

Wabi-Sabi sees understated elegance in all things. Beauty is seen in the imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. Nothing lasts, nothing is finished and nothing is perfect. This for me captures our human existence and our journey through life to full acceptance of ourselves as being in the image of God.

When I have thrown clay pots on the wheel I was predisposed to the desire to throw them perfectly. If it weren't perfect I'd be inclined to collapse what I had thrown and start again. The prophet Jeremiah alludes to God as a potter similarly reworking God's people into

vessels that seem good to him. The particular verse says, “so I went down to the potters house, and there he was working at the wheel. The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hands and he remade it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. (Jeremiah 18:3-4)

As I learned the concept of Wabi-Sabi and started to appreciate the beauty of the flaws in my work I was able to better accept my own flaws. My Virgoan need for perfection in all things slowly subsided.

If you have ever participated in or seen a Japanese tea ceremony you may have noticed the tea vessels are not perfect in shape, as we’d expect. In fact they haven’t been since the 14th century. These imperfect, perfect tea bowls have extraordinary value and sell for many thousands of dollars, some in the tens of thousands.

Like these extraordinary tea bowls we are created imperfectly perfect and highly valued by God. We are all beautiful despite the social constructs all about us that might tell us otherwise. God continually reworks us into better vessels if we allow. God’s garden contains a great variety of beautiful things. People are beautiful whether male, female, straight, gay or questioning, fully or partially able, athletic or not, fully healthy or fully not. From the innocence and vibrancy of youth to the aged markings of wisdom in the elderly, all stand before God and are beautiful.

Our appreciation of beauty and wholeness should not be defined by Ancient Greek philosophy, neither should standards of beauty be imposed on us by creative directors at fashion houses and magazines, or industrial designers at Apple or Airbus, or instagram influencers.

God does not want to discard us because we are not perfect. In fact the opposite is true. God has more in common with the concept of Wabi-Sabi than classical Greek ideals of aesthetic beauty. We are welcomed as imperfectly perfect, flaws and all.

Many people struggle to feel accepted just as they are. I have met many people in my days in ministry that struggle to believe God would accept them because of what they had done or who they thought they were. Some feel that they will only be accepted when they turn their lives around and when they stop messing up. These powerful feelings can become barriers to God’s desire to be with us.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthians to see that life could change and that God had provided a way to new lives. Paul reminded them of examples given of how not to live a life. God provides these examples to help us in our life’s journey. Whilst we might feel tested at times this is God’s way of reworking us, renewing us and refining us. We can find solace in God’s promise that no testing will be greater than our capacity to handle it.

For Christians, the true way to a full life comes through faith in Jesus Christ, faith that he is the way. By reconciling with Jesus, learning about his life and interactions with people, and following his teachings we can find acceptance and value in our own lives. After all he was

drawn to the imperfect, the widows, the sick and lame, the prostitutes and the outcast. Acceptance, forgiveness and grace flow freely from Jesus to us.

The sword of Pilate hangs over all of us. Death is a certainty but the date is unknown. At anytime the sword could fall on the just and the unjust alike. The blood of the just and the unjust will be mixed as we fall together.

No person needs to be separated from God. God provides for us second, third, fourth and more chances to reconcile with God exactly where we are in life. Just like the gardener in today's parable so God delays the fall of the axe to give us another chance.

Is someone this day tending to your needs, tilling the soil around your roots, trimming your branches to allow for new spring growth, tying up your weak limbs and fertilizing and watering the soil you are planted in. I dare say someone is whether you are aware of it or not. For certain God is tending to your needs as you listen to these words this morning.

We are all beautiful before God. However, true beauty emanates from our living God who stands with open arms to welcome us back, to hug us and to nurture our spirits just as we come and just as we are. There are no preconditions.

Open your hearts and allow the Holy Spirit to tend to your needs today for we never know when our time will run out.

Amen