

Building a Campfire in the Rain
A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Luke 13:1-10
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My understanding is that each person is created in the image of God. I would go further and say that each person is created by God in the image of God. This means that each person has, within herself or himself, some sort of energy or essence that gives each one of us the capacity to love others and to create goodness in the world, just as God loves us and creates goodness in the world.

I know this to be true, because I have seen many people demonstrate these capacities to love others and to create goodness in the world. You and I have also seen many people, including ourselves, often failing to love, and creating some pretty big problems through our greed, our fear, and our lack of ability to see the goodness God has created. So I conclude that each person carries deep within their being the potential to love and to create goodness, but this is not the dominant characteristic of any human being, no matter how good, no matter how loving.

You and I can grow our abilities to love and create goodness, by practicing and nurturing these gifts in our lives. So we practice loving other people. We work carefully. We work together to try to create something good. This is why we have this thing we call 'the church'. The church is the place where we learn and practice and nurture these gifts of love and creativity that have been given to us by God. We need a place devoted to practicing the work of love because we are not and will never be really, really good at loving others and creating goodness.

Have you ever tried to build a campfire outdoors when it is raining? I have built quite a few campfires in the rain, because I've done a lot of camping in places where it rains a lot. It takes great care to light the match and get the fire started when rain is falling all around and on top of the kindling. Even after the first few sticks are burning you have to give most of your attention to the fire, to make sure the fire doesn't go out. In my experience, building a campfire during a rainstorm is more or less a full-time job. Someone else is going to have to set up the tent or cook the dinner because one person is going to spend all of their time making sure that there is some dry wood to add to the fire and that it doesn't die out with all of that rain falling on it.

It is very difficult to build a campfire in the rain. Sometimes, even though you've paid attention and worked to do everything right, you fail to get the fire going or you fail to keep the fire going. You end up climbing into your tent with a lot of wet clothes at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Then you and your soggy companions spend the rest of the day in the tent playing card games and eating the homemade chocolate chip cookies you brought that were supposed to last for seven days.

For you and me, loving other people the way God loves people is kind of like building a campfire in the rain. It takes our constant attention. We work very hard to keep that flame of love burning in our lives. Sometimes the downpours of sadness or terrible events put out the flames of love, even though we have tried to do everything right. So you and I are created in the image of God, but many times we end up feeling like weak, ugly creatures.

For Jesus it was a very different story. My understanding is this person we call Christ Jesus was fully human and fully divine. Christ Jesus wasn't just created in the image of God. Christ Jesus, as the fully human person, fully participated in God's being in some way we will never fully understand. For Jesus, loving other people was not like building a campfire in the rain. For Jesus, love for God's people was the beginning, middle and end of his life.

So we see Jesus bringing love and goodness and truth to the world through the full range of human experience. Jesus brought love and goodness and truth to the world even in times

of great suffering, like when he was tortured and crucified. Jesus brought love and goodness and truth to the world in the most common activities of life, like eating dinner with his friends, and talking with people on the street. Jesus brought love and goodness and truth to the world even when he was angry, like the time when he overturned the market tables in the Temple.

Jesus was fully divine, which meant that God's love, God's creativity and God's truth fully permeated his life. Jesus was able to express love and truth and goodness in the full range of human actions and emotions.

We see this in the story from Luke 13. Jesus healed the woman who appeared in the back of the synagogue. Jesus brought God's love and goodness into the world by encouraging her to come forward and healing her. He brought God's love and goodness into the world by arguing with the leader of the synagogue, by pointing out his hypocrisy, and by shaming the leader in front of the crowd of people.

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. We are not. We have the capacity to love others and bring goodness into the world, but for us it's a lot more like building a campfire in the rain. We often fail to love others and to bring goodness into the world.

Jesus could bring love and goodness into the world even as he was overturning the tables in the courtyard of the Temple. I would suggest that you and I not attempt to pull off this sort of Temple clearing activity. Jesus could call people hypocrites and get angry with people and somehow still end up bringing more love and goodness into the world. It doesn't work that way for you and me.

In today's passage Jesus heals a woman who is seriously crippled. The religious leader's response is to say, "that is against the rules." One week ago we read a passage where Jesus gets very upset at the priests and the legal experts. They are power and they should know better. Jesus is upset at them for their outrageous neglect of the poor and the sick. One week ago I made the point that there are times when the only reasonable response is to be outraged.

There is another side to that coin. Jesus is able to bring more love and goodness into the world even through his anger. It rarely works that way for you and for me.

You and I may feel outraged at the terrible treatment of God's people. It rarely helps for us to act through our rage. When you and I are feeling very angry the results are often like a mob of people storming the US Capitol.

In the same way, there are very few times when more love is brought into the world by human suffering. Jesus was humiliated and suffered and more love was brought into the world. When people are humiliated and suffering, misery, and grief are brought into the world. Like Jesus, you and I can bring God's love into the world, but it takes our best care, our best energy, our best attention. It is a bit like building a campfire in the rain.

So we are strengthened by God's presence with us in all the parts of our lives: in the joy, in the manual labor, in the sweat, and in the tears. The incarnation of divine love in the life of Christ means God is with us in our fellowship, in our love, in our emptiness, and in our anger. Jesus was like us, but in one critical way we are not like Jesus. Fear, anger, suffering, and grief are not usually places of love and productivity for us. God's truth and wisdom move us beyond the fear, the anger, the suffering, and the grief. Then we can nurture that little flame of love God has placed in the center of our lives, to share the light of God's love with others.