

Did you ever have one of those nightmares where your boss shows up on your doorstep for the big dinner you've completely forgotten about? Or you dream that you're at work or in school barefoot and everyone's staring at you? Feels pretty good when you wake up and realize it was just a dream, doesn't it? If you've ever awakened from a nightmare like that then you already know an awful lot about the meaning of today's gospel.

Although some commentaries interpret it as a call for us to shape up before God crushes us in our sins like bananas under a truck, a closer reading suggests that maybe the message is deeper than that alone. Other Scripture passages, like psalm 145 for example, tell us that God is kind and full of compassion, slow to anger and abounding in love. A merciful who God doesn't watch over us with a stopwatch in one hand and a club in the other. Maybe there are other treasures in these readings we need to appreciate, too.

Let me tell you a little story. I used to teach statistics over at RPI. It was a lot of work, both for the students and for me. I'd encourage them to read the book and do their homework, but also to look at their jobs in the office or on the factory floor, keeping an eye out for something they could analyze for the statistics project they had to do. My aim was to have them change the way they thought about things so they could discover for themselves new ways to touch the underlying reality of what was going on in their daily lives. Repentance for engineers, if you will.

One day, one of my students wandered into the classroom and was surprised when I asked him where his project was. He looked at me with horror and asked "Was that due *today?!?*" Indeed, it had been.

Before I could say anything, one of the other students snickered “Yeah – the way it says in the syllabus, dummy.” The unexpressed judgment in the room as they all stared at this poor guy living his worst nightmare seemed to be, “We feel bad for you, man, but you messed up.” I could see from their expressions that they expected me to give this guy what he deserved and cut him down like that fig tree in the gospel; no mercy.

As it turns out, I don’t see things that way. To me, the whole point of teaching is about gently leading people to learn for themselves to see in new and richer ways, and to grow *into* that, free from anxiety.

I chatted with the young man offline later. I remember being quite cheerful, but also very direct. He did have to shape up, I told him, but doing so was entirely up to him. I was perfectly happy to help, if he wished.

It turned out that he was willing to turn things around and yes, he’d gratefully welcome my help. He admitted his error and we then came up with a recovery plan together that helped him learn a thing or two about statistics, something about the quality of unmerited mercy, and something about love which, I might add, is the real reason I teach.

Thinking about that student took me even deeper into the message of this gospel, and what repentance might mean. The folks whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices were taken by surprise, kind of like my student. The others who had been crushed by the falling tower were also taken by surprise – no one expected that to happen.

When Jesus says that we might suffer a fate just like those victims, he’s reminding us that the problem with any surprise is that something very important can be left undone –

something might not happen that absolutely needed to happen. In everyone's life there's a burning bush that needs to be approached. A manifestation of God's love to which, like Moses, we're invited to draw near. We simply have to do that. Jesus explains that to miss *that* invitation would indeed be our worst nightmare.

The warning in this passage to repent before it's too late or suffer the consequences is unmistakable, but it's not the only message in there. To see what else is also there, let's imagine Jesus as being the man who pleads with the owner of the orchard, but the owner not as God the Father, but as you and me; folks who can run out of patience pretty easily, all too ready sometimes, like a few of the folks in my class - to judge and cut one another down without mercy because someone doesn't meet our expectations or seems to be taking too long to shape up, in our not-so-humble opinion.

But God knows our need for care and cultivation. What else might the Eucharist be about, if not that? The message to us is to lighten up as much as it is to shape up – the call is simply to grow and bear fruit, to cultivate each other's ability to love, not to be each others' worst nightmares.

Perhaps that's what God wishes to cultivate in us; mercy that's nothing less than the purest form of kindness – a love, freely given, that's way above and beyond what anyone would ever expect, much less deserve. It is, after all, how God treats us. If that's the end-game, and it is, it should come as no surprise then, that to repent and awaken to the reality of God's love is to awaken from the worst nightmare imaginable: a merciless life lived unmindful of the love of God.