

LENT SUN 03-C

“The Barren Fig Tree”

(Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15; Psalm 103; 1 Cor 19:1-6, 10-12; Lk 13:1-9)

Are you familiar with the term *First Responders*? They are generous individuals in many communities who have had special training to be the first on the scene of a tragedy or accident. They know what to do before the police or ambulance arrives.

Repentance is our best first response to God’s call

The first reading reminds us that God is calling us to follow him, as he called Moses. And chances are that God has used a different version of the burning bush to get our attention.

The psalm tells us more about this God who calls: God is kind and merciful, forgives our sins and heals our iniquities. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, we are told. Who would not respond to this kind of God?

The answer is found in the second reading. The very people who were chosen by God, who were set free from slavery in Egypt through the leadership of Moses, who drank from the spiritual rock in the desert who was Christ, failed to respond. They consistently chose to complain; to turn away, to return to their old sinful ways instead of following a new covenanted way of life with God.

What about us? We are the new people of God, baptized into Jesus Christ, the rock of our salvation. What is our response to God’s call? In the gospel Jesus uses strong language to the people of his day; language that is addressed to us today. What is the quality of our response to him who is our burning bush today?

In the gospel, Jesus refuses to get caught up in the politics of the day, into what Pilate was doing or not doing, or questions like why bad things happen to good people. He pointedly keeps the focus on the need for us to repent, or face dire consequences ourselves. The message is clear: repentance is our best response to the call of God.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. It is a beautiful word that means to turn around, to face another direction. *Metanoia* must be our first response to God because in many different ways, we have also turned away from our God.

When we were born, we were hard-wired for God, meant to see God, to live with God, who alone can satisfy our heart’s deepest desire. The problem is that we were born into a sinful, wounded world. In a myriad of ways, simply because our parents, families, relatives and friends are not perfect, we experienced a lack of love. Or perhaps there were terrible negative influences from our society, like prejudice, discrimination, unfair treatment, even abuse and violence that came our way.

Our reaction to this lack of love, whatever the form it occurred, was to lose our faith in a God who loved us, and place our faith in false gods that don't love us, that will in the end destroy us. In subtle and not so subtle ways, we all turn away from God to a certain degree.

And now, Jesus urges us to come back, to turn back to God, to change our ways, our actions, thoughts, and attitudes. "Unless we repent, we will perish", he tells us, and recounts a parable of a fig tree to underline both the urgency, and the importance, of repentance.

Repentance is a process that we can choose to enter into. It has definite stages. The first stage is awareness or contrition. I must be aware that I have turned away, failed God, turned to false gods, broken the law of love. This usually involves a feeling of sorrow and a desire to change.

The next step is called examination of conscience. I need to dig deep, as in the parable, to name the ways that I have fallen short and sinned. That is followed by an admission, a confession. The 12 Step program of AA is a beautiful format for this that connects with the parable of the fig tree. The "digging" can be seen as representing Step 4, a searching and fearless moral inventory. The manure represents Step 5, admitting to God, ourselves and another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs. Manure is put in the earth as fertilizer, as "humus", which is the root for the word "humility". It takes great humility to confess who we are and what we have done to another human being.

I would now add three stages that are largely missing in the way that we currently celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation – the importance of listening, a declaration and healing. To really change, apologize and make amends, we must first listen to the pain of the one we have hurt, soak up their pain, make it our own, and then apologize. That way the apology takes on real meaning. The apology is complete, however, only when it is accompanied with a declaration that we will never do that same hurtful action again. This is a real commitment to change, sealed by being heard by the other.

And that leads to the next stage, healing. We cannot really change ourselves. After we have gone through what we can do to change, we need to pray for healing of our sinfulness - that which made us sin in the first place. This only God can do. And this is where real transformation takes place. This is the heart of repentance.

The last stage is making amends. We try to make up for the wrong that we have done, to repair the broken relationship. If the other person is willing to forgive, then there can be reconciliation and the relationship can be stronger than it was in the first place. And that is the mystery of God's love experienced through the process of genuine repentance.

Examples of peoples' stubborn resistance to repent abound. I think of one alcoholic I visited in the hospital suffering from alcohol poisoning. He was bloated and somewhat incoherent. In leaving I said that I hoped to see him again. His last words to me cut to my heart: "Don't tell anyone I am here." Even on his deathbed, he was too proud to admit his sorry state; to change, to repent. He died two weeks later. To this day I pray for him.

On the other hand, those who truly repent shine like stars in the night sky. Years ago, while visiting homes in a community for the first time, I was verbally abused by a man on whose door I had knocked. He swore at me mentioning something about Residential Schools and swung a hockey stick at me. Shaken, I tried to learn more about what his problem might be so that I could perhaps help him find peace. I learned that he was very angry and abusive to others as well.

Then I was informed that he was dying of cancer in the local hospital so I decided to visit him. With great trepidation I entered his room and was warmly received, relieving some of my tension. He began to talk about being sick and how that gave him a lot of time to think. Then he said that he had a lot of people that he had to apologize to. I wondered if he remembered that incident with me years back. Suddenly he said, "I am sorry for what I did to you that day, Father." My heart started to beat rapidly, and we talked about the cause of his anger. It seems that he had lost all his friends who had attended residential school to alcoholism, suicide or violent death. Again he apologized. I forgave him and we shook hands. He then encouraged me to work with youth, something he wanted to do, and to keep trying to revive the Church. I left, deeply moved and profoundly grateful. This man was entering the kingdom of God! He had repented and was being reconciled – he was truly living the gospel we just heard. That gave me great joy – a joy that stays with me to this day.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today calls us to repentance, offers us forgiveness, heals us of our defects of character, and sends us out on a mission to be ambassadors of reconciliation – a reconciliation that begins with repentance.

So let us respond to God's call, repent and find new life.