

**“God Is Faithful”**

All three of today’s lessons challenge our perception of the good life by asking us to consider whether or not we are in danger of losing what we have, as well as missing what we need. The words of Isaiah begin with a joyful summons to salvation, then highlight the fact that people often neglect this summons by working for things in this life that do not satisfy ... by living a life that does not spawn contentment. Therefore, the prophet Isaiah calls the people of Israel to repentance ... to change ... to change their life-style ... to return ... to return to their covenant with God.

Also, the words from I Corinthians 10 and Luke speaks to us directly. They caution us not to be overly confident when we think our lives are going well. Paul reminds the Corinthians that God is faithful ... that God is faithful despite their infidelity. In Luke, Jesus tells his followers a parable about a barren fig tree. In brief, all three lessons warn us of a potential collapse that comes to those who are overly proud. This warning is bluntly stated in I Corinthians 10:12: *If you think you are standing ... watch out ... that you do not fall.*

In keeping with the spirit of Lent, I want to direct our attention on that portion of the Gospel lesson known as the “Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.” I believe this parable teaches us *why* the Season of Lent is so important. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to “bear fruit” in God’s name. We are called to be productive in our faith, and yet despite our best efforts, at times we are unfaithful and unproductive. However, despite our lack of fidelity, God is faithful ... which is good for us! Because with God’s graciousness comes additional time ... time to repent ... time to change ... to come home to God.

This is a major reason for Lent. Lent is a time to get real ... an opportunity to stop living within the illusions of our life and wake up and return to God. Lent is the time to repent and to change our ways, in order to restore our relationship with God ... in order to mend the fabric of our faith ... to truly heal our wounded spirit enabling us to move forward toward a more joyful, productive, and faithful life.

The late Henri Nouwen, a Jesuit priest, in his book *Creative Ministry*, writes this: “There was a time when God sent angels from heaven with an urgent message for people. He still does. A few months ago a Vietnamese Buddhist monk came to Holland and one day walked into the house where I lived. He was a thin, slender man whom you would be afraid to touch. But his clear, fearless eyes radiated an insight so deeply impregnated with affection that the only thing you could hope for was understanding.

While he looked straight into my eyes he said: ‘There was a man on a horse galloping swiftly along the road. An old farmer standing in the field, seeing him pass by, called out, ‘Hey, rider, where are you going?’ The rider turned around and shouted back, ‘Don’t ask me, just ask my horse!’ The monk looked at me and said: ‘That is your condition. You are no longer master over your own destiny. You have lost control over the great powers that pull you forward toward an unknown direction. You have become a passive victim of an ongoing movement which you do not understand.’ It seemed as if he carved his message on my skin like a tattoo and then asked me to let it be seen wherever I go.”

Lent is the time before Easter when we take very seriously our own sinful state ... both individually and collectively.

The lesson from Luke begins with Jesus discussing two major national calamities, and then telling a parable about “second chances” for a fig tree. Historically, we don’t know precisely what Pilate has done to the Galileans whose blood he spilled during their worship. Nor do we know what the cause was of the collapse of the tower near the pool of Siloam. Both episodes clearly cost lives. Obviously, the first tragedy is caused by a human being. The second tragedy was a natural catastrophe. Like us, when faced with a natural or national tragedy, the people asked Jesus why such bad things happen to good and innocent people? And whom should they blame?

Interestingly, Jesus redirects their questions. He does so because he understands that such speculation about suffering is a distraction from people’s obligation to trust God, as well as to lead a penitent life style. Let us listen closely to what Jesus is saying, because given the times in which we live, there are few answers to the acts of evil that are daily occurrences. The war in Iraq that has and continues to destroy so many innocent lives is incomprehensible to sane people. Therefore, Jesus’ approach to the subject is valid. Jesus says that the questions we should be asking ourselves are not “why” but “how?”

Jesus tells us that in order to be prepared for death, we must repent of our sins. We must ask God for forgiveness. That makes physical death a side issue in light of God's promise of eternal life. Worrying about "why" or contemplating "who" to blame is futile. Placing our life in the loving arms of God helps us to heal, and opens our ears to hear God's plan for us. We can agonize over and over again regarding the situations that befall us. We can ask why. But the danger of asking "why" is that our why questions often paralyze us to the point that we fail to recognize God's voice when God speaks to us.

In the forefront of our minds ought to be the fact that God is faithful! For example here is a classic illustration that I tell every three years as a poignant reminder: A Christian man was flooded out of his home and some neighbors came by in a truck asking to take him out of the area. The man refused saying, "No, I will stay and be safe because the Lord will provide." The water got higher and folks in a boat came along wanting to remove him from the area and again the man refused saying, "No, I will stay and be safe because the Lord will provide." The water rose higher and soon the man had to move to the roof and a helicopter flew overhead. The crew shouted to the man that they were there to take him to safety. Again, confident in his faith, the man refused, "No, I will stay and be safe because the Lord will provide."

The water swept over the roof and unfortunately the man drowned. When he got to heaven, he was furious with God and angrily said, "God, I believed in you wholehearted. I worshipped you every Sunday, I tithed my income, and I believed that you would save me?" Why did you let me suffer and die?" And God answered, "I tried to save you. I sent a truck, a boat, and a helicopter!" We, too, can be so overwhelmed by life's problems that we fail to acknowledge God's presence in our life ... we fail to hear God's voice speaks to us ... we fail to listen to the gospel message come to us. In the forefront of our minds, ought to be the fact that God is faithful!

By referring to the two historical tragedies that people would have been familiar with, Jesus heightened their attentiveness. Once he has their attention, he tells them a parable that essentially says: *Stop dwelling on things you can not control in your life ... stop worrying about the past which you can not change ... and start focusing on your need to have a right relationship with God. Many chances have been given to you and the last chance is soon on the horizon.* The parable is focused on forgiveness and grace ... so it is important for our faith that we learn what Jesus teaches.

Specifically, the fig tree occupied a favored position. It was not unusual to see fig trees, thorn trees, and apple trees in vineyards. The soil was so shallow and poor that trees were grown wherever there was soil to grow them. But the fig tree had a more than average chance, and the one in today's parable had not proven itself worthy. Repeatedly, directly, and by implication, Jesus reminded the people that they would be judged according to the opportunities they had.

The parable teaches that people who only take and never put back will not survive. The fig tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil and in return was producing nothing. Jesus equates such behavior as sinful. For in the last analysis, there are two kinds of people in this world ... there are those who take out more than they put in, and there are those who put in more than they take out. Each of us is in debt to life. We came into this world at the peril of someone else's life, and we would have never survived without the care of those who loved us.

We have inherited a great country and freedoms that we did not create. Over time, those who paid the supreme price gave those freedoms to us. And there is laid upon all of us the duty of handing things on to the next generation better than we found them. "Die when I may," said Abraham Lincoln, "I want it said of me that I plucked a weed and planted a flower wherever I thought a flower would grow." If we take that pledge ourselves, we will fulfill the obligation of putting *into* life at the very least as much as we take out.

The parable also defines the "gospel of the second chance." A fig tree normally takes three years to reach maturity. If it is not bearing fruit by that time ... it is not likely to fruit at all. But this fig tree was given another chance. Jesus' way is always to give a person chance after chance. Ask Peter or Mark or Paul about that fact! God is infinitely kind to us when fall and rise ... again and again. But the parable also makes it quite clear that there is a final chance. If we refuse chance after chance ... if God's appeal comes to us again and again in vain ... the day will finally come, not when God has shut us out, but when we ... by our deliberate choice ... have shut God out of our life!

We are to live in penitence and trust before God, and penitent trust is not to be linked to life's sorrows or life's joy. Can anyone suffer more than Jesus suffered on the cross? Penitent trust knows the full meaning of I Corinthians 10:13: *God is faithful, and ... will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing ... will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.* During these remaining days of Lent, let us no longer hesitate to draw near to God. Let us not hesitate to turn our hearts towards God's forgiveness and grace. Let us not hesitate to fall on our knees in repentance that God may help us to come home ... again!