

## Another Chance

Isaiah 55: 1-9; I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9 Psalm 63:1-8 3-11-07

For the past several weeks we have read scriptures that have stressed the importance of bearing good fruit through the lives we lead for God. We have been told over and over again that we are to lead productive lives and not just drift along like leaves in a stream with no purpose or goal. We are told that those who do not choose to lead such lives will find themselves sorry for their laziness.

The prophets proclaim this over and over again. Today in our reading from Isaiah, one of the major prophets by nature of the length of his work, we are told that the nation Israel, so often a failure in God's eyes, is given, yet again, another chance.

Very often Isaiah told of the coming doom and gloom for Israel, but here a feast is being made ready for those who will seek the Lord while God is near. A positive future will be the nations if it turns around and discovers the right and true way of living. It should no longer squander its time and effort on those things that do not satisfy its people spiritually and emotionally. "Come back into covenant with God," says Isaiah, "and all will be well." The nation needed to repent of its former way of life and take up the new.

A surface reading of the gospels tells us that Jesus must have had a difficult time with fig trees. He is either cursing a barren one or suggesting that one that has been around for three years without producing any fruit should be done away with. We need to realize that the fig tree is a metaphor for the nation Israel. Once again the notion of the necessity of being productive is brought to light. If there is no good fruit produced that should be the end of the tree or the nation. But, the gardener, who I imagine to be Jesus, tells the owner of the vineyard, God, that it is necessary to give the tree another chance. With nourishment and care something may come from the life of the tree. If this added effort produces no results, then the tree should be destroyed. This parable follows two stories that tell of the need people have to repent of what it is they have done in the past and determine to live their lives anew if they are going to move forward with God.

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes of God providing a way out of lives that have gone wrong. Paul reminds his readers of the times the Israelites faced and tells them that God was not pleased with that nation. While his readers may face temptations and testing such as their ancestors did, there is always another chance to repent of the way life has been going and to make things right and new again.

I am not sure we like the word "repent." It sounds a bit as if we should be walking around beating ourselves in public and making some sort of confession of all the wrongs we have done in life. Fortunately, in the New Testament the word translated as "repentance" is the Greek word "metanoia." This word has nothing to do with self-flagellation, but means "a turning around of thought"—or simply put, to "think differently" after a while. It is "a change of mind accompanied by regret and change of conduct."

Repentance is a three-fold process. It requires actions of the intellect, the emotions and the will. It is a complete package. It cannot be a half done conversion like that relayed in a little story in which several explorers found a cannibal tribe in the depths of the African jungle. When they were brought before the tribal chief, he greeted them in perfect English, and informed them that he had studied at Oxford.

"Then you are a civilized man," said the explorers, "and yet you come back here and eat human flesh."

“Well,” replied the chief, I use a knife and fork now.”

Just having the veneer of repentance is not what we need to have. We need to actually have it change us. It does not mean that we simply turn away from the way we have been but that we turn toward God-- a God who always gives us another chance.

Most often we cannot turn our lives completely around in one fell swoop. That would be the ideal, but when we stop to reflect upon ourselves we realize that the process of becoming the people God wants us to become will take time. Instead of trying to change completely over night, I would suggest that we begin by working on some of the flaws we see within ourselves one at a time, always remembering that we judge ourselves more harshly than anyone else ever would.

When we have one disturbing trait handled, we can move to the next. If we start chipping away at some of our less than noble behaviors we can accomplish much and actually see some positive change. We can see this change in the way we respond to others and the way their responses begin to change toward us. This is difficult, change is very hard for all of us. I have a friend who reminds me, often, that “People change, but not much.” And we don’t unless we have a change of mind and heart and consciously catch ourselves when we slip backward a bit.

We cannot excuse ourselves from resisting change for the better because we do not know the way. If we are sitting here, we have at least a nodding acquaintance of the way Christ has called us to be. And we have been called to a life of reflection and a life of change. We have been asked to make the world a better place for everyone. We are to seek what it is that we have in common with others, what it is that makes us all human. Instead of always looking for what it is that makes us separate and different, we need to find what it is that unites us. As we come toward the mid point of Lent, we need to remember that Jesus left his followers and us with a simple commandment on Maundy Thursday, to love one another.

Lent rhymes with repent. This is the time of year when we are supposed to calm ourselves down from time to time to reflect on the direction our lives have taken. After being as objective as we can be and discovering where it is we need improvement, we need to integrate a new way of living into our beings. We need to think of the little fig tree and find those things that nourish us and urge us to grow stronger and more faithful as we strive to turn our lives into productive entities for the increase of the kingdom of God. Amen