

3rd Sabbath in Lent
March 5/7, 2010
Holy Communion
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DEFRAGGING

Luke 13:1-9
Series: *faith.net*

Occasionally, my desktop computer begins to get slow—slow starting up, slow responding to commands—and I get really impatient! Usually, the problem is that the hard drive needs “defragging.” So, I run the disc defragmenter program that analyzes the condition on the hard drive. The analysis usually indicates that the data or files on the hard drive are “fragmented,” or scattered. A click on “Defragment” usually does the job in just a few minutes. The result is great improvement in performance and speed.

There’s a modern day parable here, namely, life can become fragmented and scattered, resulting in decreased enjoyment and satisfaction, as well as poor performance where relationships, profession and faith are concerned. The season of Lent offers us opportunity to pause and analyze the condition of our lives and faith, to defrag and improve our performance so that life becomes more enjoyable, satisfying and faithful.

The New Testament word for defragging is “repentance.” It doesn’t mean merely to be sorry; it means literally “to turn around,” to go in a different direction. Repentance isn’t just an emotion but an active change in one’s life. In the first part of today’s text from Luke’s gospel Jesus uses the word “repent” twice and then describes an act of repentance in a parable at the end.

Jesus is teaching in Galilee. Some of his hearers that day told him about two very tragic events: a bloody vengeful act by Pontius Pilate, Roman Governor of Judea, against Galileans worshipping in the Jerusalem temple and the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem near the pool of Siloam that crushed eighteen people. Although we know nothing more about these incidents, one appears to be an act of outright human evil, the other a natural accident. “Why?” people asked Jesus.

And so do we. “Why?” we ask when bomb-laden terrorists engage in genocide, killing themselves and others. “Why?” we ask when hundreds die and thousands are injured by earthquakes in Haiti and Chili. “Why?” we ask when an innocent child dies or good people suffer. Often our questions go unanswered—or the answers given are unsatisfactory or insulting to our intelligence and faith. “It was God’s will” we often hear, blaming God for evil acts or natural disasters.

“They must have done something wrong,” it is said when people suffer for no apparent reason. You won’t hear those from me!

In Jesus’ day the prevailing answer was that there is a direct correlation between suffering and sin, a correlation that is unmistakably evident.(1) Yes, evil can and does injure and destroy. The problem, then and now, was that the answer can become generalized to the extent that one could say that the good are prosperous and healthy while the evil sink into poverty and illness—an answer given by some preachers of what is commonly called “the prosperity gospel” in our own time. It must be true because those preachers get rich proclaiming it! Certainly, you can find the correlation between good and prosperity, on the one hand, and between evil and poverty or illness, on the other hand, in the Bible: Psalm 1, for instance.

And many agree. This notion is so influential that a number have looked upon lack of success or experiences of loss as divine punishment. Some have even argued against acts of charity toward such persons because such acts would interfere with God’s punishment! It’s outlandish, of course, but not really surprising because people usually like to conceive of a god that favors them, their kind and their lifestyles.

Jesus, on the other hand, announced God's favor on the poor, the maimed, the blind, the crippled. That in itself should have broken any insistence that financial, social, or physical condition is always a direct reflection of one's spiritual state. The common observation that sometimes the evil prosper and sometimes saints suffer should have shattered those ancient dogmas. In fact, Jesus suffering at the hands of the lawless should have buried forever the notion that those who suffer are the worst sinners and those who prosper are favored by God. But it hasn't.

And so these Galileans come to Jesus and want to know if violence and suffering are just random events or come about through God's command. "No," he says, rejecting such foolish theology, not only because such explanations are pure conjecture but also because they deflect attention away from the primary issue: namely, the obligation of every person to live in penitence and trust before God, and that penitent trust is not to be linked to life's sorrows or life's joys. "But unless you repent you will all perish just as they did," he says to them and to us.

Life in the kingdom is not an elevated game of gaining favors and avoiding losses. Without repentance, all is lost anyway. All of us, regardless of circumstance or financial condition, need to defrag—that is, get rid of stuff standing between ourselves and God that prevent a life

of faithfulness—so that whether the times are good or bad we are confident that God is with us to provide strength and grace to live differently.

Repentance means change. It can be as simple as praying, admitting our mistakes and guilt, asking for forgiveness, guidance and strength. It can be as difficult as struggling with addiction. It can be as liberating as a walk in the sunshine on a cool day. Do your own analysis of your relationship with God and your life. Evaluate your performance of love for neighbor and service to those in need. Are you scattered, worried or frenetic with the demands of work, family, or life condition? Are you losing your focus on God? Need to defrag? Jesus and Lent teach us to do just that—and you will have that opportunity in a few moments as we prepare to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion.

The second part of Luke's text is a parable about a fig tree that had produced no fruit for three years. The vineyard owner proposed to cut it down and stop wasting the soil. But the gardener offered another proposal: "Give it another year," he said. "Let me cultivate the soil around it, fertilize it, and see if it will bear fruit next year." This is a parable about repentance—for the vineyard owner, gardener and for the tree—initiating change that can bring about fruitful life.

Computers in need of defragging can freeze or collapse entirely. So can one's life and faith. Jesus says to the Galileans, to us, there is still time for change, for repentance, for turning life around. Lent is a time to defrag and to receive the grace of God, to cultivate our barrenness through worship, prayer, and study. It's a time for spiritual formation, to receive the nourishment of God's love and forgiveness around this table, to grow faith in God and in service to others. Share your need for change with God. Then come to the table, intending to lead a new life by the grace of God. Thanks be to God!

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1. Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation*, p. 168. I am grateful for Craddock's insights into this difficult text that are used throughout the sermon.