

The Third Sunday in Lent

Holy Comforter Church

The Rev. John E. Shields

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There is a story that is told of a man who had a parrot that could talk. The bird was remarkably beautiful and had a very extensive vocabulary. In fact this bird could actually carry on a conversation. He could ask questions and talk about a wide range of topics. There was only one problem. The bird used awful profanity and was constantly embarrassing its owner.

The owner and the bird had many conversations about the bird's language, but the conversation always ended with the bird telling the owner to go to 'you know where' or something even worse.

Needless to say, the owner was getting very frustrated but really did not know what to do. He read books on the subject of corrective training for profane birds but when he broached the subject, the bird told him where to put the books.

Well, one day some ladies from the church were coming over and the bird became very angry when the owner tried to tell him how to behave – i.e. he began to curse the owner. About that time the door bell rang so the owner picked up the bird and thinking that he was putting him in the refrigerator, he stuck him in the freezer.

In an hour or so after the visitors had left --- the man went into the 'frig' looking for the bird, he wasn't there; then, he heard a soft knock on the freezer door and he opened it. There was his prized parrot, shivering with beak chattering. He quickly removed it from the freezer and the

bird with great difficulty said “I am truly sorry that I cursed – I promise never to do it again. I have only one question.

“What is that?” said the owner.

“What did that turkey do?” the parrot replied.

That is certainly a long and silly way to get to a short and serious question.

Do you sometimes have a secret notion that those who have had a particular calamity happen to them – a fatal illness, an accident, or a natural disaster --- that they must have sinned and displeased God and now they were being punished? Do you sometimes ask: like the parrot, I wonder what they did?

Did those people in Haiti and Chile sin more than the rest of us who have not been subjected to earthquakes?

If you have had those kinds of thoughts, you are in good company. It is exactly the kind of question that is being asked in today’s gospel. You may remember that Jesus talks about two different groups: one, a group that was killed by Pilate and their blood used to desecrate the temple sacrifices; the other, a group upon whom a tower had fallen.

Jesus asked the questioners whether they thought that those upon whom these misfortunes had fallen were worse sinners than other Galileans or others living in Jerusalem. It is a rhetorical question – Jesus answers it for them – he says, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will perish as they did.”

Now I want to say, “Wait a minute here Jesus, are you threatening us – if we don’t shape up something bad is going to happen.”

The answer is no, Jesus is simply saying that repentance is necessary, and that our time is finite.

Those folks had simply been in the wrong place and at the wrong time. That can happen to good people and bad people. Actually, Jesus is refuting what one writer describes as a popular ‘Hebrew theodicy’ of that time.

The popular way of thinking was that the blessed of this world were reaping the fruits of a righteous life and the afflicted were reaping their just deserts for sin – either their own or their ancestors’.

Well, you might say, “How about, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent you will perish as they did.”

If the story ended there, we might say that Jesus was in agreement with the popular belief – obviously, if that were the case Jesus would not have been asking the question and, more importantly, he would not have then told the short parable that followed.

“A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not you can cut it down.’”

True story: A couple was having very serious problems with their teenage daughter. The wife and mother discovered that the child had been missing weeks of school – skipping. There were other behaviors as well that indicated some serious problems with the child. The mom was at her wits end, she had no idea what to do. Though it was not typical for

her to read the bible, she had recently been to a weekend church retreat that encouraged bible study.

So with this pressing problem much on her mind and in a real state of depression and absolute frustration, she opened her bible and today's parable was the passage she read. Amazed to have found something so relevant to her situation, she decided to put more energy into the nurture and discipline of this child and give her a chance to straighten her life out. It met with success.

An interesting aside: the mom called her priest and told him of her dilemma and how she had read her bible and found the story of the fig tree and that had solved her problem. She was surprised with the priest responded with a very anxious question: "Which fig tree?"

You see there are accounts in Matthew and Mark of Jesus putting a curse on a fig tree and killing it. So the priest was rightly concerned. He was very relieved to hear that this account was the gospel according to Luke.

So here is the 'so what?'

Bad things happen to good people. We never know when some tragedy will happen or to whom. You don't have to worry about what the frozen turkey next to you did – you just need to repent and always be ready, for the kingdom is always at hand.

And finally, for the good and for those who are not so good – God is patient and merciful. God is a God of second chances, and you are loved no matter who you are or what you have done. You can and will receive another chance, but you and I always need to be repentant and in relationship with God, because one thing is for sure: someday the time will run out.

