

## Third Sunday of Lent - C

When Jesus began his period of public ministry, the message was simple: “Repent and believe the good news. The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

For some, that was enough. They responded to the call by leaving all they had and following Jesus. I guess you could call them the “early adopters” of his message.

A significant part of Jesus’ ongoing ministry was to identify the things that were holding back those who did not immediately respond to his message.

I think today’s Gospel can be read in that light. In the conversation Jesus has with the people who tell him about a disaster that occurred in Galilee Jesus uncovers an attitude that is holding them back:

They seem to think that the disaster is a result of some sin on the victims’ part. Of course, one advantage of such an attitude is, if nothing bad has happened to you, then you must be doing okay. The call to repentance need not apply.

So, Jesus offers a corrective: The parable of the unproductive fig tree provides another interpretation. God is patient. If there is no fruit of repentance, he is willing to spend some additional effort to see if he can yet bring it around.

It’s easy to see that Jesus casts himself in the role of the gardener who takes it upon himself to cultivate and fertilize in the hopes that a change may still occur.

He is not willing to give up on those to whom he has been sent.

The notion of giving up, and the necessity of resisting that temptation is one that fits in well with the season of Lent.

For many, Lent can be a discouraging time of year. We are confronted with the need to face our sins, to believe in God’s mercy, and open ourselves to the grace of conversion.

In my conversations with many people, however, I have come to realize how demoralized many of us are.

One of the most frequent reasons people give for not celebrating the sacrament of penance and reconciliation is that when they do, they basically confess the same sins that they did the last time. It can seem like a never-ending circle.

I know I feel that way at times, too. Some of my sins have been with me for decades. And to confess them again and again is almost an admission that I’m not really serious about conversion.

But there could be another interpretation that is more beneficial.

In the history of the church, there have been two predominant images of God that have become tied to the sacrament.

The one is God as judge, and for many people that’s the one uppermost in their minds when they come to confession. I know that because they start out with “Bless me Father, for I have sinned. I accuse myself of the

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following..." almost as if they were in a court of law.

Actually, some of the forms of the act of contrition are firmly entrenched in this way of thinking about the sacrament as well"

Oh my God, I am heartily sorry for all my sins, because I detest the loss of heaven and the pains of hell...

At the end of that particular version the prayer continues: I firmly intend, with the help of thy grace, to confess my sins, to do penance and to sin no more."

It's a nice thought, but maybe not too realistic.

If we start out from a different image of God, God as the divine physician rather than the divine judge, things can look much more hopeful.

One characteristic of a good doctor is that he or she continues to work with you until you are well, even if it takes a while, even if there are starts and stops, even if the treatment plan means that things will get worse first so that they can get better eventually.

That image has a long tradition in the Church and actually seems to be the one that Christ prefers.

So, this could be the season to let go of the image that is not working for you and embrace one that does a better job of sustaining your hope.

If God says he's willing to continue to work to bring us to fruition, cultivating us with the

sacraments and fertilizing us with his Word and grace, we can take that as an invitation to do the same, to resist the temptation to throw up our hands in despair and think that we are beyond help and instead, to continue to work on moving forward in the life of faith.

It's true, some things take a while, but for all that, they too can be affected by the steady application of grace and forgiveness.

God is not giving up on us. Let's not give up on ourselves, either.