

Third Sunday in Lent

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Trust is crucial in any relationship. One of the ways that we establish trust in relationships is consistency. We do what we say we're going to do. We make promises. And by keeping those promises, we build trust in our relationships. I'm a big fan promises. More specifically, I like to make promises. I'm great at verbalizing the things that I want to do or that I'm going to do. But, my track record of keeping those promises...? Ehhh.....it could be better...

Maybe you're like me.

So, I want you to think about if you made a resolution or multiple resolutions this new year. Think about what you said you were going to do or not do.

Now, 2 months in, how are you doing with keeping on track with those resolutions...? Is there a noticeable difference?

I'm the same way. I'm really great at making resolutions. I can imagine all the ways I want to better myself and all the things I'd like to do differently this year. I'm less great at following through with those resolutions. Whether I get bored, or lose motivation, or my goals are too lofty...like I said, my track record is...not so great.

And so I rationalize it. "Well, I just couldn't do it this year. I was too busy. School got in the way. I couldn't afford it. But next year...next year will be different. Yeah, just one more year..."

One more year...

And just like making resolutions at the start of a new year, a lot of us also resolve to do or not do certain things during the season of Lent. We make promises about how we are going to live differently during this season. Whether giving something up or adopting something new, maintaining spiritual disciplines is one of the defining characteristics of the season of Lent.

But disciplines aren't necessarily natural for us. That's the very nature of disciplines, they're not easy for us to adopt. The traditional disciplines of Lent—earnest prayer,

fasting, and sacrificial giving—don't fit neatly into our already established patterns of life.

In fact, these practices are meant to disrupt the well-worn routines and ways that we find ourselves in. By their nature of being disruptive to our routines and not coming naturally to us, we have to engage in these practices with a certain degree of purpose. Said another way, ***practices have to be practiced.***

The season of Lent has a way of providing an interlude in our lives that makes us analyze our well-worn patterns and determine to what extent our lives are or are not reflective of the life of discipleship we are called to as Christians.

And when those well-worn patterns and habits are not in line with the kind of life that God intends for us, God calls us to repentance. Repentance is the connective thread running through all our readings for today. The prophet Isaiah calls us to turn back to God. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul cautions us not to fall while we think we are standing. Jesus very explicitly warns us, “Repent, or perish.” But repentance is more than being sorry for having done something wrong.

When we repent for our sin—when we repent for the ways in which we have not lived as God has called us to live...the ways in which we don't recognize one another's full humanity...the ways in which our ways of life further oppress and marginalize others—we ask for forgiveness, yes, but we also declare—we make promises—to God and to one another, that we recognize how these old patterns of living are not life-giving and commit ourselves to living differently.

It's a change in posture for how we encounter—how we live—in this world.

Repentance, then, is a physical word. Martin Luther used the Latin phrase *incurvatus in se* to talk about sin. Literally, being turned in on oneself. It follows then, that to repent from one's sin would be to be turned outward; for Luther, a literal change in curvature of the spine.

A change in posture for how we live in this world.

Returning to the Lord, as the prophet in Isaiah says, means a reorientation, a physical movement, a visceral change in posture to align ourselves with God's hopes and desires for us...and for the world.

And, as the prophet says, “God will have mercy...God will abundantly pardon. For God's thoughts are not our thoughts...nor are God's ways our ways.”

In that radical reorientation away from ourselves and back toward God, God in God's mercy offers us abundance beyond compare. God promises that abundance to us.

By radically reorienting ourselves toward God's vision and hope for the world, God promises that we will encounter a world where the hungry are filled with good things, the thirsty are quenched, and the richness of God's bounty are given to all without cost. And God keeps God's promises.

That's our hope, friends, that God is faithful and keeps God's promises. Even when—especially when—we don't keep ours.

The gardener in our gospel lesson today asks the vineyard owner to let the fig tree alone for "one more year," to give him time to dig around it and put fertilizer on it. But why would a fruit tree that hasn't been kept or cultivated would bear fruit anyway? I think that a tree that has been left to its own devices would simply do what trees do, take root and grow, but maybe not necessarily bear the ripe, tasty fruit that the vineyard owner is expecting.

It's interesting, a version of this story appears in both Matthew and Mark, but in those versions, it's Jesus who is the one looking for fruit, and in both cases he finds none, but instead curses and condemns the fig tree to never bear fruit again. And at once the tree withers away and dies. In the case of Mark, the writer makes it clear that it wasn't even the season for figs.

So, why would Jesus, who comes looking for fruit out of season, get so upset by this that he commands the tree to wither and die? And I think it's an appropriate question for us, do we expect to simply bear fruit? Without having done the difficult work of cultivation and fertilization? Do we expect that our Lenten spiritual disciplines will produce good fruit in us for the life of the world without first having done the difficult work practicing those disciplines?

And in case we're tempted to think that all of this is squarely on us, that we're the ones toiling in the hot sun tending our own individual little fig trees of spirituality, friends, in what ways are we the fig tree? How much more are we in need of being tended and fertilized, watered and fed?

Dear people, God is the best gardener. Lovingly digging and tilling the soil of our lives. Cultivating in us hearts that yearn to return to God. Soaking us in the waters of baptism and nourishing us with gifts of bread and wine, spiritual food, so that the

seeds of love might grow in us and produce in us fruits of grace and mercy for the life and abundance of all God's creation.

God always keeps God's promises. So *even if* the fig tree dies. *Even if* the tilling and fertilizing and watering don't take and the tree is good for nothing more than scrap lumber. Remember that on those branches, on those scraps, on those beams, on that rocky, barren hill where nothing could ever possibly take root, our sin was crucified with Christ. And after laying dormant for three days, life sprung out of the dead ground.

Our God brings resurrection from things that are dead. God's promises of salvation and life everlasting are for us—us who have died in sin—and yet are made alive together with Christ.

And God always keeps God's promises.