

Third Sunday of Lent March 23, 2025

The liturgy of this Third Sunday of Lent begins by acknowledging God's holiness and his claim on us that we belong to him. It recognizes that we are his own sons and daughters, and must live in a way that reflects his holiness. God offers us the gift of faith as our path towards holiness.

At the same time, we all want and desire to live a peaceful life. We all want to make sense of our existence. We all desire to live a life where we can make a positive contribution to ourselves, to our families and to those around us.

Challenges are always with us, difficulties surround us. However, the more we long, desire and develop a personal and ultimate relationship with Jesus Christ as our best friend, there is absolutely nothing that we cannot face or overcome.

In this season of Lent, we prepare for the feast of Easter by trying to purify our body and spirit, in order to abundantly receive the fruits of the Redemption of the Lord. Today the church invites us to reflect on the urgency of repentance in an attempt to enhance our Christian lives.

“So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?”

Some people seem to always want to help in any way they can. And I don't mean for money, or even for the recognition. No, I'm talking about people who just feel it's important to give of themselves in order to make things better for someone else. We all know people who fit this description. They're the ones who always say yes to someone's request for a favor. They're the ones helping out at our soup supers, pancake breakfasts and parish picnics and others.

Unfortunately, I am not one of those people. Well, maybe not completely, but for the most part. Actually, I'm like some of you, one of the people

attending and benefitting from many of those things. I'm the guy just enjoying the company of others, and eating the pancakes, and enjoying every soup, and visiting the beer tent, and asking for favor. But I'm rarely (if ever) the guy standing on the other side of the table, serving others. But I'm a good person, right?

“So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?”

So says the owner of the fig tree to his gardener in the parable we just heard from the mouth of Jesus in the passage from Luke. Just prior to that, some people who approached Jesus had evidently been speculating as to the moral culpability of people who suffered greatly at the hands of Pilate.

Jesus answers them by also mentioning another similar situation in which a tower fell on a bunch of people, killing them. He assures them that in neither case was it because they were somehow greater sinners than anybody else. But what he seemed to be more concerned with was the fact that they were clearly judging others, while being unaware of their own faults, their own shortcomings, their own sin. And so he tells them this parable about the fig tree.

“So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?”

But I'm a good person, right?

I don't do anything too bad, don't do anything that causes great harm to others or to the world. The bad I do, well, it's little stuff, petty stuff, insignificant stuff. God couldn't be too upset with me, could he?

This story makes me wonder, it makes me wonder if I am falling into the same kind of trap, the people questioning Jesus fell into. And I'm starting to wonder if I am more like that barren fig tree than I am willing to admit. Yes, it's true, I don't do very many really bad things. But might my branches be barren anyway? Are they without fruit? Put another way, am I a giver or a taker, someone who adds life and goodness and joy and light

to the world, or do I simply deplete its soil, take and take and take without ever adding anything back in?

This is a harder question to answer, because it takes a great deal of self-awareness and self-reflection. It takes honesty and humility. It takes a letting go of one's ego. And it takes a willing heart, one that truly wants to be open to the changes God desires to make within each of us, changes that flow from knowing that God has loved us first, and wanting to pour out those same good things on others without counting the cost.

And these changes have little to do with the past or the future, these changes have little to do with who we were before or who we will maybe get around to being eventually. It doesn't matter if we did something good in the past, bore some fruit six months or a year ago. And it doesn't matter if we pledge to start bearing fruit (that is, being the person God wants us to be) in a year or two or three.

Rather, our loving God wants our best right now. He wants us to stop taking and start giving now. He wants us to bear fruit now, stop exhausting the soil and start putting some life and love into the world now. That's the God we have. The God of the present, the moment, the eternal now.

“I am who am.”

But I'm a good person, right?

If by “good person” I mean not doing really terrible things, then yes. But maybe not if being a good person is so much more than that. Maybe not if it's really about bearing fruit, about helping out, about reaching out, about pouring out every good thing we have to offer.

Looking the other way, or expecting others to do the work, or taking the easy way out, well that seems to be what Jesus has a problem with.

So let's make sure we have a problem with it too.

Short Story

John D. Rockefeller built the great Standard Oil Empire. Not surprisingly, Rockefeller was a man who demanded high performance from his executives. One day, one of those executives made a two million dollar mistake. Word of the man's enormous error quickly spread and all were scared to meet the boss.

One man didn't have any choice, however, since he had an appointment with the boss. So he straightened up his shoulders and walked into Rockefeller's office. As he approached Rockefeller's desk, he looked up from the piece of paper on which he was writing. "I guess you've heard about the two million dollar mistake our friend made," he said abruptly. "Yes," the executive said, expecting Rockefeller to explode.

"Well, I've been sitting here listing all of our friend's good qualities, and I've discovered that in the past he has made us more money than he lost for us today by his one mistake. His good points far outweigh this one human error. So I think we ought to forgive him, don't you?"