

“The Three R’s of Lent”  
March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
Jeff Clinger

Luke 13:1-9

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, ‘Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’*

*Then he told this parable: ‘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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’*

We are currently in the midst of the Christian season of Lent – a time of 40 days leading up to Easter when we have the opportunity to reflect on our lives and on our faith. This season of 40 days is representative of the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness and gives us the opportunity to address those temptations and places of wilderness in our own lives. This Lent, Steve and I are preaching a sermon series that doesn’t necessarily hang on a cutesy theme, but one that nonetheless is based on a very important concept.

This Lent we are preaching a series of sermons about the importance of understanding our lives and our relationships with God and others as a journey. During Lent and always it is important for us as Christians to keep in mind that we are on a journey, always to be learning and growing. Two weeks ago Steve began the series by talking about the important point that the core purpose of the journey is the journey. And last week I talked about the importance of keeping moving on the journey. While the temptation is always there to stop and settle in when we’re comfortable, we’re called to

keep moving, to keep learning, and to never put a period where God would have there be a comma.

This morning then, on this third Sunday of Lent, I want to talk about an important process that is a part of our relationship with God as well as the roll that we as humans have as a part of this process. I imagine that many of you are familiar with the three R's of early childhood education – reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. Well this morning I want to share with you what I've taken to calling the three R's of Lent.

I don't imagine that if you were to Google "The Three R's of Lent" you'd get very many hits. While these three themes are often connected with one another in Christian conversations, the catchy three R's title is all my doing. Doing sermon planning over the last several months it just somehow came to me that this cyclical process can be characterized by the three R's of repentance, reconciliation, and restoration. Let's begin this morning by talking about repentance...

The word from the Hebrew Scriptures that we translate into English as repent is Shuv'. When Jesus was teaching he was doing so in Aramaic, but when he spoke of repentance he was likely speaking of this Jewish understanding. The word Shuv literally means to turn around. When we talk about repentance what we are talking about is turning around, turning back, specifically turning back to God. Let's take a minute and look at today's scripture reading emphasizing this understanding of repentance.

*(Read at Solid Ground – Luke 13:1-9)*

*At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other*

*Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.’*

*Then he told this parable: ‘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 round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.” ’*

In this story Jesus is teaching and he says, “unless you repent, you will perish.” In many Christian circles this is interpreted as, “unless you say you’re sorry, God is going to get you.” This understanding of God as out there to get us and punish us is one that is dangerous and hurtful. It creates an understanding of God that is easy for people to reject. But, what if we hear Jesus’ words paying particular attention to repentance as the idea of turning back? If we understand Jesus to be saying, “unless you turn back to God, you will perish” it is a different message. It is not a threat, but simply an observation. Unless we turn back to God and away from those things that lead to death and distract us from God’s hopes for us, we will perish. We are called to repent, to turn back to God, because when we don’t we live in destructive and harmful ways.

The remaining verses of this passage share one of Jesus’ many parables that illustrate for us the goodness of God. This parable illustrates for us the goodness of God revealed in the gardener. When others might be ready to give up on us, when others have

decided that there is no hope, God is present. However, like the gardener planned to do with the fig tree, there must be some space cleared out in our lives to allow God's nourishing love to surround us and help us reach a point where we do bear fruit. This space is created when we turn back to God, when we repent.

I know I've spent a fair amount of time addressing the idea of repentance now and while it is only one of the three parts of this process it is the one over which we as human beings have the most control. Therefore, it is also the one where we often have the most problems. As we continue thinking about the importance of continually turning back to God as we journey through Lent and through all of our lives, let's turn now to look at the next two steps in this process.

Following our human act of repentance, of turning back to God, is God's action of reconciliation. Reconciliation is God's forgiveness; it is God's touching of our lives with God's love in ways that can be transformative. It is crucial though that we understand that God is not unwilling to be reconciled to us unless we repent. Often it is made out as if this is the case, that God is distant from us until we say we're sorry and ask for forgiveness. God is constantly there, loving us, reaching out to us, hoping that we will make the right decisions. For as long as we continue to wander though, for as long as we continue to stray from God and to ignore God's hopes for us, the act of reconciliation isn't possible. However, when we repent, when we turn back to God, God welcomes us with loving arms, and I am sure celebrates that we have turned back.

The third R in this process then is an outgrowth of being reconciled to God. When we have been reconciled or reconnected with God we can experience the third R – restoration. When we enter into a relationship with God, when we turn back to God, we

can more fully experience God's love for us and this then allows us to be restored to the people that God would want us to be. We can be restored in our relationships with one another, we can be restored to proper channels of self care, we can be restored back to the hopes and dreams that God would have for us.

An important thing to understand about this process though is that it is cyclical. There is a rhythm to the process and it repeats itself over and over again throughout the course of our lives. Some Christian traditions would minimize this process and want it to be a one time thing – you repent, God forgives you, you are saved. It is, however, not quite so simple. Every day we have the opportunity to acknowledge things in our life that distract us from God and pull us away from God. Every day we can uncover new things that give us need to turn back to God. And every time we do this we can be assured that God forgives us, loves, us, and call us to be better people tomorrow than we were today. The reality is though, that it won't be long before we'll again uncover something that distracts us from God and the cycle will begin again.

I have said it over and over again from the pulpit and in conversations with many of you – God loves us exactly the way we are... but doesn't want us to stay that way. This process, these three R's of Lent, are connected to this simple theme. Even if we've wandered away from God, God loves us for exactly who we are, but is hopeful that we'll turn back to God.

As with most things in faith and life the key to this process is balance. As with anything then, this system is one that can be abused and become dangerous when it is out of balance. Particularly, I think this process can get out of whack in two different ways. Both of them, of course, are related to our human activity of repentance.

The first way that this system can get out of balance is when a person has way too much repentance. People who have been in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship or who are somehow emotionally scarred might have the tendency to do this. These persons would do a lot of what I would call beating themselves up. They never think that they're good enough; they're always naming their flaws, their problems, their shortcomings. Having been told that they're not good enough or smart enough or pretty enough often enough, they begin to believe it.

These persons can many times then fall into the trap of repenting over and over again, crying out to God, turning back to God, and feeling as if they're not good enough for God. When people fall into this pattern they shut themselves off from the opportunity to experience the reconciliation and restoration that God offers. When people keep beating themselves up over feeling as if they're not good enough, they don't create space for God to work, to forgive, to love, and to transform. If you sometimes find yourself stuck in this place, be assured that God loves you, forgives you, and seeks to offer you a healthy and abundant life.

The second way in which this system can get out of balance is when people misuse or abuse the idea of repentance. This lack of balance is poignantly illustrated by a story that an older friend of mine has shared with me about growing up here in the region. This friend grew up Methodist and ran around with a bunch of guys in high school that were Roman Catholic. He shares that it used to drive him crazy when on a Friday night his friends would do horrible things – you know, causing problems, harassing girls, those things that often high school boys would do.

His issue with his friends was not so much that they would do these things, but that they would then go to confession and mass on Saturday afternoon, ask for forgiveness, and then go right back out on Saturday night and do the same things. For this friend of mine, his friends' actions cheapened their relationship with God and made them look like hypocrites. Their repentance wasn't authentic, they weren't turning back to God with the hopes of being transformed by God, they were merely turning back as a pit-stop on a journey in which they had every intention of continuing to do things exactly the way they had been. When repentance is cheapened or watered down like this it doesn't allow authentic opportunities for people to experience God's reconciliation and restoration.

And so the challenge is out there for us through the rest of this journey during Lent and for all of our lives. As you continue to journey through Lent and through life may you remember this cyclical process – these three R's. May you be reminded of God's steadfast love, calling out to us, asking us to repent and to turn back to God. May you be reminded of God's forgiveness and grace and love that are waiting for us each and every time we turn back. And may you truly experience, even if only for fleeting moments, what it is to be restored to who and what God would have you be.