

Homily – The Time for Change is Now

Rob Keim

February 28, 2016 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

My parents are both retired and in their late seventies. My dad worked for a hospital system for thirty years, and a few years after he retired the hospital system went bankrupt. The tragedy for my parents is that my dad's defined pension plan was underfunded by the hospital system, and a year-and-a-half ago, his pension ended... completely. This is a tragedy that is compounded by my dad's high medical expenses.

Now, four years before the pension ended, my parents knew that the pension was going to go away, but they did not adjust their spending. And, after the pension ended, my parents still did not adjust their spending.

I think they put off changing because of two things. First, due to my dad's poor health, my parents weren't sure how long my dad would live, so they didn't want to change their live style and circumstances. A very understandable rationale isn't it.

Second, my parents have a very Calvinist belief that God will provide. While they didn't know where the money would come from, their spirituality told them that God would provide for them. They had other retirement income, and God would provide the excess needed so that they didn't need to change. Another very understandable rationale.

Now, a month ago, something hit the fan and all of a sudden my parents realized they were going to be out of money soon. There was crying and grieving, and they were suddenly figuring out what they were going to do next. There was a sense of urgency with lots of options being tossed around. There was sadness but also a recognition of the blessing of having several viable options. My parents were finally going to take action to get their income and expenses in alignment.

A few days later, I was talking to them, and the urgency was gone. My parents had figured out what to do to stay in their house for another year. They could put off the reckoning another year before they ran out of money.

Now to me, from three thousand miles away, it seemed like the ostrich had put its head back in the sand again. To me, it seemed better when there was a sense of urgency, and they were going to do something before they completely ran out of money. And, that is what I brazenly shared with my parents. I told them that it seemed like their spiritual belief that God would provide, was getting in the way. My parents weren't taking action yet because they felt like God would provide and allow them to continue living in the way they had been living.

Now, I decided to share this very personal story because it is such a good illustration of the Gospel lesson we heard Susan read this morning.

Today's passage is the fifth in a group of six passages in Luke in which Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God and the potential each person has to be eternally connected to God or eternally disconnected from God. Using the old fashioned language Jesus is focusing on the coming judgment and the doom some could experience. Using the language of this Gospel passage we being called to repent or perish.

Repent or perish. These are stern words that need to be unpacked to better understand what they mean for us.

Today's passage is made up of a two-part current event, the Galileans killed by Pilate, and those killed at the tower of Siloam, followed by an instructive parable, the one-year reprieve of the unproductive fig tree. This structure, a saying tied to a parable, is found throughout the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Now today we don't know much about the two events Jesus shares at the beginning of the passage. We know that Galilee had a lot of Zealot insurgents who sometimes had violent uprisings against the Roman occupation. It seems likely that during one of the festivals a major disturbance occurred in Jerusalem, and it was ruthlessly put down by Pilate, the Roman governor. The religious elites were some of those in the crowd who were listening to Jesus share today's passage. These religious elites hated Rome, but they also hated the violence of the Zealots. The religious elites of two thousand years ago would have felt that Pilate's killing of the Galilean Zealots was just. Furthermore, they would have believed the killings were a demonstration of the wrath of God against those who do bad things.

Jesus disagrees with the premise of the religious elites, a premise based on a spiritual tradition that has gone askew.

To illustrate this Jesus shares a second story this seems to be another current event of the day. Now, today we have no record of the tower of Siloam. However, scholars guess that it was associated with the building of an aqueduct in Jerusalem under the orders of Pilate and financed by the confiscation of the sacred Temple tax. The religious elites would have resented the misappropriation of Temple funds and would have viewed the workers on this project as stained by sin and worthy recipients of divine judgment.

Once again Jesus disagrees with this premise of the religious elites.

After the first story, Jesus points out that the unbounded love of God is the same for the Zealots and for the religious elites. God loves both.

And, the same way happens after the second story. Jesus points out that the unbounded love of God is the same for the workers killed by the falling tower and for the religious elites. Again, God loves both.

In both instances Jesus is pointing out an idolatry that we still have today. We still believe that God is against our enemies and God is for us. We still believe that tragedy is evidence of God's displeasure. If something bad happens to a person then they must have done something to deserve it. And, conversely, if something good happens to a person then God must love them more. In today's passage Jesus is telling the religious elites, and by extension telling us today, that we must repent of this incorrect idolatry. We must turn back to a spirituality that leads us into health relationship with God and with others. We must turn back from a false path that thinks God loves us more than the other.

In the last part of today's Gospel passage we hear a parable about the unproductive fig tree. In the parallel stories told by Matthew and Mark, the landowner has the gardener cut down the tree. Enough is enough. However, in Luke's telling of this same parable, the gardener begs a one-year reprieve. With this telling of the fig tree parable a sense of urgency is added. Time is running out. Repent now before it is too late.

I am going to make the bold statement that we all have things in our lives from which we should repent. Or, if you don't like the word "repent", then we have things in our lives that need to change.

Perhaps it has to do with our use of money.

Perhaps it has to do with our lack of love for those that are different than we are.

Perhaps it has to do with pride, or vanity, or an addiction that controls us.

Most of us here today recognize that there are things that we can do differently so that we are in healthier relationship with God, others and self.

Now, in addition to our change as individuals, there are things we could change in our churches.

“The civil religion we have today doesn’t demand changes to our lifestyle or familiar habits. The best way to avoid actually changing is to go into your head and endlessly argue about what “changing” means. Human minds love to argue, oppose, critique, judge, evaluate, and adjust—it gives our little minds a job. Academics, politicians, and seminary professors love to stay right there and rarely hit the streets of the incarnate or suffering world as Jesus clearly did.”

If we had screens during worship, I would have these next two important sentences up on them. Are you ready?

“To be afraid of change is to be afraid of growing up. Change and growth are the same thing. Unfortunately, the church has trained many people in not growing up.”

We often provide people excuses or other distractions that allow people to continue on the same path of life that is NOT as life giving as it could be. We have so many dead end spiritual paths that have become part of our tradition and as a church we must repent of those errors.

And we must change now. Not tomorrow. Not next year.

St. Augustine from the 4th century is famous for having prayed “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.”

We have a lot of reasons to put off change, but that also means putting off healthier relationships and deeper spirituality.

Now, sometimes our churches have told us that we must repent immediately for you might die unexpectedly and then you will really be in trouble. This fear mongering is not useful.

Instead we must change now because we can begin to reap the benefits in this life. We can improve our physical lives now. We can improve our mental lives now. We can improve our spiritual lives now.

Change is hard work.

We can make it easier when we pray and talk to God about change.

We can make it easier when we surround ourselves with role models who are already at the destination we want for ourselves.

We can make it easier when we recognize that small steps add up to big steps.

And here is a relevant quote from the clergy retreat a few of us attended this past week.

“It is only when our LONGINGS match or exceed our fears then we are able to say YES to change.”

Let me repeat that.

“It is only when our LONGINGS match or exceed our fears then we are able to say YES to change.”

What beautiful things do you long for yourself? And, what are your longings for our church?

My parents put off change in their finances. My sister, who is a CPA, had been nagging them about changing for the last five years. It didn't seem to help my parents change. Their longing for new things did not exceed their fears of change.

I had a conversation four weeks ago with my parents about their situation, and I talked to them about my belief that God would provide but maybe not provide for them in a way that continues to support their current life style or in their current house. We talked about their spiritual beliefs that may have been leading them askew and away from making change happen now. Perhaps my parents have been like the religious elites in today's Gospel passage. They thought God would provide privileges in response to their putting God at the center of their lives.

My parents have also started daydreaming about ways they could save on their cost of housing so that they were once again free to do other things. They are starting to see that if they stop dawdling then they may be able to fulfill some of their longings.

What Holy longing is God putting on your heart and mind? How are you and we being called to repent and to do it now?