

It's not About Punishment...
February 28, 2015
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To put things in context. In Israel, in Jesus day, there was a common assumption that if something tragic happened to someone, it was because of some sin they had committed. People still do that today.

Then here come Jesus to say, it ain't necessarily so. People come to Jesus with the story of Galileans whom Pontius Pilate had slaughtered. Jesus asks them if they think the Galileans were somehow worse sinners than people who were not slaughtered. He answers his own question with a resounding "no". And here's where it gets tricky. Immediately after that he says "but unless you repent you will all perish as they did."

He raises the issue of another tragedy, asks the same question and gives the same "no" answer and adds, again, but "unless you repent you will all perish just as they did." Jesus is telling us not to equate tragedy with divine punishment.

Jesus is certainly not saying that unless we repent we will be slaughtered or have a tower fall on our heads. I think he is speaking about our relationship with God, which could perish or decay if we are not in right relationship with him.

Now repentance, as it is used here and in other places in scripture, refers to a different way of seeing things, adopting a different perspective, changing our behavior. There's a sense that repentance involves reaching out to repair our relationship with God and our neighbors.

I like the notion that sin is anything that moves us further away from God. I think of my lack of this sort of repentance as building a wall between me and God, and the more I lack repentance (or refuse to change my perspective or reach out) the higher the wall gets until it totally blocks the sunlight of the spirit and leaves me in the dark.

When we are on the "outs" with someone we love, we lose the connection, the intimacy that had been there before; we build a wall between us and them. We need to reach out to them and look at things in ways that tear down walls, not which builds them higher and stronger.

We are called to repentance in Lent. Is that so that nothing bad will happen to us? Jesus says “NO” Or that if we are good something good will happen. Give the televangelist a \$100 and you will be rewarded 7 fold. And receive a full color brochure and a CD to keep. No. It’s not about what we earn, or God sending earthquakes to punish us. Jesus has said “No”.

Now having given us free will God does allow us to reap the consequences of our choices; If I drive drunk I WILL bear the consequences as may some innocent people. If we continue to pave over every blade of grass, we will have toxic run-off into the rivers that supply our drinking water.

Jesus is about grace not crime and punishment, not about good works and reward, not about earning a seat in heaven or in hell.

Okay, so if reward is not the point of repentance or giving alms or fasting or any of things we are called to in Lent, what is the point?

No matter what we do we will not become suddenly perfect. Robert Browning said that “man’s reach should exceed his grasp, else what’s a heaven for”. We will never be perfect, but we can continue to reach out—to God and to God’s children.

God reaches out to us and nurtures us and never gives up on us. Jesus the Gardener continues to love and tend the fig tree in us. We don’t know if the fig tree ever bore fruit, but it was tended lovingly. Jesus, the Gardner reaches out to us, on the journey and from the cross.

So let us, in Lent, nurture our relationship with God, reach out to tear down the barriers between us and HIM and between us and others. Let that be the nature of our repentance. Let us reach out our hands and give alms freely out of gratitude, not in order to earn a salvation we have already been given, let us fast in order to turn our thoughts to people and things outside of us. We will then truly be responding to the Ash Wednesday bidding to the observance of a Holy Lent and our relationship with God will grow and never perish.

AMEN