

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

Rev. Ross Smillie

March 24, 2019 – Third Sunday of Lent

Real Repentance – adapted from 2007.03.11, 2013.03.03

Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did. – Luke 13:1-9



A young man named John received a talking parrot as a birthday gift. Now the SPCA people say a pet is not a good idea for a gift, and this parrot was a good example of why. The parrot had a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of the bird's mouth was rude, obnoxious and laced with profanity. John tried and tried to change the bird's vocabulary using every behaviour modification technique he could think of, but none of it worked. If anything, it just got worse.

The day before Thanksgiving, John was getting ready to host his family for dinner. His relatives were pretty staitlaced, and he was getting really stressed about what this parrot was going to say in front of them. The parrot chose that day to unleash the longest string of foul language John had yet heard. John lost his temper and yelled at the parrot. The parrot yelled back. And then John really lost it: he grabbed the bird, stuffed it in the freezer, and slammed the door. All of a sudden, there was dead silence. Not a peep was heard from the freezer.

For a moment John was relieved, but then he had a horrible thought that “dead silence” meant “DEAD silence.” He hadn’t meant to kill the parrot! Quickly, he opened the door to the freezer and there was the parrot hopping from foot to foot on top of the frozen Thanksgiving turkey. John stretched out his hand and the bird hopped onto it. Then it hung its head in a contrite way and spoke clearly and politely: “I believe I may have offended you with my rude language. I'm sincerely sorry and I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my unacceptable behavior.”

John was stunned at the change in the bird's attitude. As he was about to ask the parrot what had made such a dramatic change in his language and attitude, the bird continued, “I know it is really none of my business, but may I ask ... what did the turkey do?” <uproarious laughter, I hope!>

Staring at that other frozen bird, that parrot realized that he had a stark choice: “Change or die.” This is what some people call a “Forced Option.” A forced option is a pressing issue that requires decisive action. You have a choice. You can take that action or you can not take it, but in a forced option situation, not to take action is still a decision. Imagine, for example, that you are driving toward a cliff really fast; you have options: you can either slam on the brakes really hard, or you can turn sharply, or you can do nothing. But if you decide to do nothing, you are in effect deciding to go over the cliff. The parrot in the joke, staring at the frozen turkey in the freezer, realized he had to watch his mouth or face a similar fate. In the same way, an addict may realize

that he or she has to change or face the consequences; a bickering couple may realize that they either have to change or the marriage will die; a parent may realize that a relationship with a child has to change or the child's rebellious behaviour will lead down a disastrous road; an employee may confront the choice to perform better or get fired.

In the little story we heard from the gospel according to Luke, Jesus tells people they are facing a similarly stark choice: change or die, he says, repent or perish. The context is that people had been talking about a couple of recent tragedies: some Galileans had been massacred by Roman soldiers in the temple, and some workers had died in a collapsing tower. The background isn't completely clear, but there is a possible connection between those two events. (show slide) We know from the historian Josephus that about this time the Roman governor Pilate decided to build an aqueduct to carry water to Jerusalem. Which would have been fine –Romans were good about public works. But Pilate tried to pay for it by taking money from the temple treasury. It would be like if the Red Deer City Council decided to pay for a water pipeline from church savings accounts. You can see why people would have been upset. They gathered in the temple to protest, and Pilate didn't tolerate protests.



He sent soldiers to violently disperse the protesters, several people were killed and many more injured. If the collapsing tower mentioned was part of that aqueduct project, those working on it would have been seen as collaborators and there would have been rumours that they were only getting what they deserved. So some people died for protesting the project and some died for working on it. Jesus posed the question, “were either of these groups worse sinners than anyone else?” Was God punishing some of them, and if so which ones?

You hear the same question being asked whenever there is a tragedy. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, for example, Jerry Falwell famously said that God was punishing America for its loose morals. After a vigorous outcry he retracted his statements shortly thereafter. But people who are diagnosed with multiple sclerosis or cancer, or are injured in car accidents, or who lose loved ones, often ask similar questions: “Is God punishing me?”

Jesus is unequivocal about his answer: “No, I tell you!” he says. These tragedies don't happen to punish us for some inscrutable failing. God isn't sitting up in heaven and zapping us for things we do or don't do. Sometimes, accidents happen. The turkey didn't do anything wrong. It was Thanksgiving, and it was a turkey! 😊

But then Jesus adds this puzzling statement, “unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” The strange thing about this is that it seems to affirm what he has just denied: that death is the punishment for our behaviour. I think the difference is that punishment seems to insert God as the arbiter of consequences. We don't need to blame God or sin, to know that the predictable consequence of some actions is death. If you drink and drive, you may well kill and be killed. If you smoke, you may end up with lung cancer. A tower not built according to sound engineering principles may collapse. Prod a sleeping bear and you might get mauled. Provoke an empire and

you might get massacred. The world operates according to predictable patterns that we humans can identify and discern. Understanding and living with respect for those patterns will save us a lot of trouble.

In this case Jesus was not talking about personal repentance and personal death. When he said “Unless you repent, you will all perish,” the word “all” is significant. He is talking about communal repentance and national destruction. He is talking about social decisions and the direction of our communities. And in this case he is talking about how the tiny Jewish nation related to the mighty Roman empire, and warning that continued rebellion would be suicidal. In Jesus’ time there were continual rebellions and intrigues. And over the hundred years after he died, charismatic leaders claiming to be the Messiah led two major rebellions, which were violently put down by the Roman armies, leading to hundreds of thousands of deaths. If you visit the city of Rome today, you can see the Arch of Titus (show slide) , built to celebrate how Emperor Titus besieged Jerusalem, and sacked the city in the year of 70 of this era. (show slide) The Arch shows religious symbols from the temple being carted away by the victorious soldiers. Luke remembers and retells this story in the aftermath of that horrific war. In saying, “repent, or perish,” Jesus was pointing out a forced option: the Jewish people needed to change direction and pursue a non-violent path in dealing with the Romans, because the path they were on was leading inexorably toward catastrophe.



So what does that historical background mean for us today? Our situation is different, but we are still facing many forced options that threaten us with the choice to repent or perish. It is not enough to be a good person individually; we will still all suffer if we as a society don’t start thinking and acting differently.

One threat is the one expressed by Albert Einstein: “The unleashed power of the atom has changed everything, except our way of thinking.” (show slide) Einstein was pointing out that in the era of atomic bombs, military conflicts could devastate the whole planet. We need to find non-violent means to resolve our conflicts. “Repent or perish” when we are talking about weapons of mass destruction is just common sense. Unfortunately, as one wag put it, “common sense is not very common!”



Another threat is the one placed upon us by environmental challenges. (show slide) It is increasingly becoming obvious that we cannot continue to produce, reproduce and consume at the rate we do. If every person on the planet consumed and produced as much



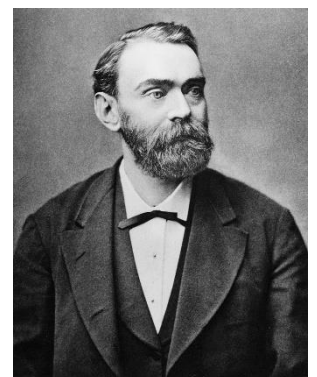
waste as the average Canadian, we would need seven planets to support our current population. The latest estimates are that within a few decades we will have hundreds of millions of environmental refugees and trillions of dollars in economic costs because of climate change alone. Where will Calgary's water come from when the Bow Glacier disappears? "Repent or perish" when we are talking about environmental health is also just common sense. If only it were more common!

Many congregations, service clubs and bowling leagues are also in a forced option situation. Many of these groups, and our congregation is not immune from this, are getting older and younger people are not replacing those who are no longer able to participate and contribute. If that trend continues, over the years the congregation will wither away until there is virtually no one left. (show slide) The United Church is facing a similar issue at a national level, as are many other churches. In this case repentance doesn't mean we are doing something wrong, but that what we are doing isn't sustainable. What we should do differently is not clear. We could for example, work harder to attract younger people, or we could do Senior's Ministry really, really well, and attract more seniors. Hopefully, we can do both. But to do nothing is to choose an unacceptable future. "Repent or perish" when we are talking about congregational and denominational renewal, is just common sense.



Lent is a season of self-examination, a time to look closely at our lives and to ask if we are really living the way that God intended us to live. It is a time to ask questions not just about our personal lives but also about our social arrangements. We need to face tough choices about where we need to change. When we discover things we need to change, then we repent. Repentance doesn't mean to feel guilty, it means to change the way we live and act, both individually and communally. Sometimes, like with the parrot, it takes a bit of a shock to make us wake up to the reality of the need to change the way we live.

The story of Alfred Nobel (show slide) is a good illustration of what real repentance means. Nobel was a chemical engineer who became rich and famous for inventing dynamite. He was interested in dynamite primarily for its applications in industry and mining. But although Nobel was a pacifist, dynamite also came to be extensively used in bombs. Alfred Nobel was heartsick over the death and destruction caused by his invention. Then one day, his brother Ludvig died. When Alfred opened the newspaper the next morning he discovered that his (Alfred's) obituary had been printed by mistake. The headline read, "The Merchant of Death is Dead." He realized that he faced a forced option. If he did nothing, we would be forever remembered as the "the merchant of



death.” But he did not want to be remembered that way, so he rewrote his will, and stipulated that his fortune would be used to fund prizes in the areas of chemistry, physics, medicine, literature and peace. Today, his prizes recognize and draw attention to notable accomplishments in many fields, not least of them the area of peace. Alfred Nobel is an example of a man who changed the way he was remembered by taking decisive action in response to a forced option situation.

Sometimes decisive action is required. What will we do in response? Will we fiddle while Rome burns? Will we rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic? There is no shortage of examples of peoples who failed the test, who did nothing, and who paid the price. There are also, fortunately, many examples of people who, with strong, decisive leadership, read the signs of the times and took corrective action to stave off disaster. And we have a patient and compassionate God, who, like the gardener in the parable, is actively at work through the Spirit to show us a new and better way.

Let us pray.

Patient gardener of creation, change our minds, our hearts, our souls. Reveal to us the small, realistic steps that we can take to walk in your kingdom and change the direction of our lives and communities. When the challenges seem too great, O God, remind us that a journey of a hundred miles begins with a single step, and set our feet on the right path. Amen.