

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Lent – March 23-24, 2019  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
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“The Dead Sea.” You’ve heard of it, right?

The water in the Dead Sea begins as snow in Lebanon, on the top of Mount Hermon. The snow melts, and those small streams trickle down and eventually form the Jordan River in northern Israel.

That water flows south into the Sea of Galilee, which is a fresh water lake full of fish and life. At the southern end of the Sea of Galilee, the water flows out and once again becomes the Jordan River.

It flows through harsh, desert landscapes, and keeps descending until it reaches the Dead Sea – 1300 feet below Sea Level. There, the water just stops – there is nowhere for it to go. You’ve reached the lowest point on the face of the earth.

So the water sits there in the Dead Sea, and it evaporates. That’s how it’s worked for centuries.

So why is it called the “Dead Sea?” Well, even fresh water has some salt and minerals in it. So, as the fresh water evaporates, it leaves behind the salt and minerals. And since this has been happening for centuries, the salt and mineral content is now so high that absolutely nothing can live in that water.

That’s why it’s called the Dead Sea.

But remember, just north of the Dead Sea is the Sea of Galilee. The same water flows into *both* of those seas. Why is one sea full of *life* and energy and vitality, and the other is *dead*?

Well, here’s the difference: The sea of Galilee RECEIVES the fresh water from the mountains in the north, and at the southern end it allows the fresh water to keep flowing out. In other words, the Sea of Galilee *receives*, and *gives*.

But the Dead Sea... well, it receives that same fresh water, but that water never goes anywhere else. The Dead Sea receives, and *keeps*. And it is *lifeless*.

Now, I’m telling you all this because it may help us to understand today’s rather strange-sounding Gospel reading.

Today's Gospel begins with an odd conversation between Jesus and some people. Apparently, up in Galilee, some people had been killed and Pilate mixed their blood with the blood of their sacrifices. Yuk. (Pilate was a nasty man).

But apparently, some folks believed that God had allowed this to happen to these Galileans because they were particularly sinful. There was a strand of Jewish piety which believed that if some tragedy befell you, it was a sign that you had sinned against God, and God was punishing you.

But Jesus rejects this thinking. And instead of focusing on why *those* folks *died*, Jesus wants his listeners to change how they *live*! "You need to repent," Jesus says. "Repent" = change your mind, change your heart, change your actions.

Then, a second tragedy is mentioned: a tower fell on people. Again, some believed that those victims must have sinned. But Jesus repeats: don't speculate about *their* sinfulness – deal with your *own* sinfulness. Repent. Change your heart and change your ways.

Our Gospel begins with a strong invitation from Jesus – we, his people, need to turn away from our sinful, destructive, ungodly ways, and *live* his Gospel more fully and faithfully.

Then, to drive that point home, he tells a parable about a fig tree which isn't producing any figs. The owner wants to cut it down. The gardener wants to be patient. The *gardener* wants to give it another chance.

Pause for a moment: how is God described in the Book of Genesis? What is God doing there? He is *planting a garden*. God is the *gardener* in Genesis! So, in this parable, perhaps the patient gardener is Our Father in heaven. Our Father, who is patient. Our Father, who is willing to give us another chance. Our Father, who is not ready to cut us down, cut us out to make room for a crepe myrtle.

Our Father looks at us and says, "I'm not done with her yet. I'm not done with him yet. There is still time for them to do what they are supposed to do."

What is the fig tree supposed to do? What was the fig tree made to do? To produce figs! To bear fruit! To nourish others.

But, for the past three years, the fig tree hasn't produced a single fig.

If it hasn't been producing figs, what HAS it been doing?

Well, apparently, the fig tree has been doing the following:

- + taking up space in the garden
- + soaking up sunlight that other plants could use to grow
- + drinking up precious water, which is scarce in the desert
- + pulling nutrients out of the soil
- + requiring time and energy from the gardener

In other words, the tree has been receiving *a lot*, and giving *nothing*. It has been *taking*, but not *giving*. Light, water and nutrients have been flowing in – no fruit has come out of it. So the tree is very close to becoming as dead as the Dead Sea.

God the Gardener says: “we are not giving up. Let’s give it one more year of light, water and soil. One more year of care, space and nutrients. Let’s be patient, because this tree could change. I believe this tree can change, and it can *give*... give good fruit for others.”

Jesus is not really giving us a gardening lesson – he is giving *a life* lesson to all who want to follow him.

We have an awesome, faithful, patient, generous God, who has given us everything.

Just think of the amazing gifts God has given you just today. He woke you up, alive and breathing. Speaking of breath, he gave you the air that you breathe, the food that you’ve eaten, the body that gets you around, the brain that thinks, the heart that feels.

God has put people into your life to love. God has given you talents, abilities, energy. He has given you experiences, wisdom, and chances to start over.

And today Jesus asks a simple question: “what are you doing with all of these lavish gifts that God constantly gives you?”

Remember the Sea of Galilee? Fresh water flows *in* as a gift – and fresh water flows *out* as a gift. Since the Sea of Galilee receives and gives away, it is vibrant and full of life.

The people I know who are full of life are the people who understanding that every gift they’ve received from God is ultimately placed into our hands so that we can give it away to someone else. Think of the talented people you know who share their talents, gifts and energy with others – aren’t they vibrant, happy, fully alive?

But then there are people like the fig tree – people who constantly take, but do not give. People who constantly receive, but produce nothing for the good of others. Whatever God gives, they hold close, hold for themselves.

And like the Dead Sea, God's precious gifts flow into a life like that, and then... everything dies. Because the precious gift flows nowhere.

So let's review: this homily took you from the snow on Mount Hermon, to the Jordan River, to the Dead Sea, to the Galileans' blood, to a fig tree and a patient gardener. And in all of that, Jesus is saying: "you still have time, but the time to begin is today."

You have time to repent, but today is the day to begin that repentance, that change.

You have a Father in heaven who loves you wildly and gives to you abundantly. You were created in the image and likeness of that God, which means that you, too, are called to love wildly and give abundantly.

The Lord is giving you every gift you need in order to do the very thing you were born to do. Sin tells us to take every gift and hold on to it. Sin tells us to grab for more, cling to everything, avoid the needs and hungers of others.

But you were born to bear good fruit for the kingdom. And you will *live* – you will *thrive* – you will feel *fully alive*, when you celebrate every gift God gives you as another chance to give a gift away.

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