

Third Sunday in Lent—Year C, 2016

The Rev. Ian Burch

St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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Travis and I live near many, many college students. I know we live near students when I notice the number of inexpensive sandwich and pizza shops near our home. I know we live near students when I see very young people driving older cars that are CLEARLY hand-me-downs from their parents. And I know we live near students when Walgreens is packed with 19 year olds in search of junk food at 11 p.m. on a Friday night. God bless them all. I sort of miss student days.

My favorite confirmation that we live near students presented itself just this past Christmas Eve. I was walking the dog on a dark and magical night, and I saw a young man packing up his hand-me-down car with a duffle bag and several cans of Pringles potato chips. He was not wearing a coat, and I heroically resisted saying anything. I got a little nostalgic thinking about him driving on a cold night to go home to his parents' house so that the whole family could be together for Christmas morning. I imagined his whole tribe on a farm somewhere, under the stars, drinking apple cider and singing songs around a piano, as all 19 years olds enjoy doing. In the middle of this Norman Rockwell vision, I noticed that the last thing this young man put in the back of his car was not a bag of gifts, but rather a huge basket of disgusting laundry. What a gift that must have been for his parents. God bless students.

Still, even with the stinky socks, there was something sweet about the ritual of return—returning home at a certain time of year to reconnect with family. I don't know this young man's life, but let's assume that it was a reconnection of warmth and kindness. His trip home had the feeling of a ritual or a season or even a play.

Our Lenten observances ritually, seasonally reflect our repentance. We spend a lot of time on our knees, and our Gospel stories are often about some kind of re-connection with God after an absence. There are lots of helpful ways to think about repentance. Sin and forgiveness are two of them. I happen to think that sin and forgiveness are good ways to describe the human condition. But for many of us, those two words are so bogged down by time that they're a little hard to encounter creatively.

So I wonder if—more than repentance, sin and forgiveness—it might be helpful to think about this Lenten season as one of Returning. What does it mean or what does it look like to return to God with our Pringles and dirty laundry?

Today's Gospel story includes a discourse about Pilate that I'm going to ignore—though feel free to ask me about it later. Today's Gospel also includes a short parable. In today's parable, we find a tree that won't bear fruit. The tree's owner wants to chop it down, but the estate gardener urges restraint and wants to give the tree a chance to blossom.

This parable is pretty straightforward and invites an easy explanation for the cast of characters—God is the owner; Jesus is the gardener, and we’re all the trees who had better get to growing or ELSE God will have us chopped down. Case closed.

I appreciate that this is a possible reading. And I appreciate that this might even be a traditional reading, but I’d like to propose another one that might be more helpful to our community.

Imagine, our gardener tending to this tiny fruit tree year after year. And imagine the owner coming over and being angry that there doesn’t seem to be any fruit. And then the gardener and owner have their argument over the tree and finally go about their respective business.

Now imagine that this happens, not just once, but year after year after year. These two men come into the orchard to check on the blossoms, the fruit. Watching and waiting to see what will happen—anxiously awaiting the good stuff. They return to this spot at the same time, every season, to try to get a glimpse of a flower, or even the beginning of a bud. The owner says “chop it down” and the gardener says “let’s wait.” Their argument is dramatic. It is certainly seasonal. And, I wonder if it isn’t a little bit liturgical.

What if God is with us in our struggle to see to bloom? And what if the owner’s anger is just our fear that God is absent? And what if the patient gardener is just the voice of our better natures—reminding us to return to this place time after time, because that returning action will eventually rewarded with good fruit. I wonder if there is something holy about us, standing together, at the base of a tiny tree looking for goodness there. Maybe the argument is the natural anger we feel when it seems that God is not keeping up God’s side of the bargain—not being as fruitful as we would like God to be.

We know there are places in this world that lack a bloom. And God knows that these places made us angry or afraid. Why isn’t our orchard, our city, filled with flowers? Why is it instead filled with poverty or war or senseless violence? I’d probably want to chop it down too.

But the gardener encourages restraint, caution, hope. Hope that we really will see this fruit one day. What a radical belief and reliance on a benevolent God. We should all be so lucky to have faith like the gardener. Thank God that they return, year after year, to the orchard, hoping for fruit.

Parables are dense, and there are many different ways we might read them. For this season, and in this parish, I wonder if the idea of returning might be instructive in our Lenten observance. We return—just like that young man at Christmastime, basket full of dirty laundry. We return—just like the owner and the gardener to the tree, searching for the good fruit even in the midst of our arguments.

Because the fuel for returning must be hope—hope that we will be welcomed home, that the tree will flower, that our God will receive us as we are...sometimes broken, sometimes sinners, and always longing for a return to God.

The tree looks pretty barren right now. I get that. But we are a people who can see past that state of things. We are a people who can imagine an orchard full enough to feed everyone. And so we return to God. Even when we are having a hard time seeing the buds on the trees. We return to God and are reminded of God's love, God's faithfulness and God's hope for this crazy world.

So, yes, repent. Say your prayers and examine your conscience this Lent. But more importantly, consider a return to a God who is faithful, who is just and whose joy is to sustain us these 40 days. Amen.