

CHANGE DIRECTION OR DIE
3 Lent March 7, 2010 – Grace Episcopal Church
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Luke's Gospel today has the crowd asking Jesus about some disasters that had befallen people. Just like us today as we view the happenings in Haiti, or Chile, or Taiwan, or Darfur ... we want an explanation. We want an answer to the question, "Why?" It's hard for us to think that a loving God would permit this. There has to be something terribly wrong.

The easiest answer, and one that was common in Jesus' day, was that when something bad happens, God is punishing the people. That type of thinking still persists today. Bad things happen to bad people. It's as simple as that ... right? Wrong. Jesus dispels that clearly today and takes it another step farther. Things happen. Suffering is random. It is not tied to particular behavior. Doing one thing does not always mean something else will follow. We have to live in a world with the tension of suffering and death that just occurs. Furthermore, we can't avoid suffering just by "being good."

What we do hear from Jesus is a call to a way of life that demands something of us. Twice in the Gospel today Jesus says, "Unless you repent, you also will perish." What does that mean? Let's put it in a little more modern language. Repent means to change direction. Perish means to die. What Jesus is saying is unless we change direction, we will die. What?

Change direction or die. Sounds scary, doesn't it? But this is Lent, and Lent always challenges us to repentance, to a change in direction. Jesus is saying that something isn't right, that something has to be different, and that it's an urgent matter ... a matter of life or death. I see this played out in our lives all the time.

The past two days I was at the Diocesan Convention in Cherry Hill. Bishop Councill's address was alarming. He said we were a church in decline. The Bishop talked about the mergers, closings and other changes that were taking place around the Diocese. He spoke of our church being like a sinking boat. There are dramatic cuts to the budget, no plans for an assisting bishop. The Church is dying. Something has to happen or we might as well start planning our funeral.

What are the answers? Bishop Councill said changes in direction are needed. He challenged us to be a mission church ... one that looked outside of ourselves to others. What's the fastest growing population of people in New Jersey? Hispanic! We have to find a way to create more missions, more room for these people. He talked about how we are moving in the direction of being a welcoming church to gay and lesbian people. He mentioned how we have to get up and get out!

Like the bishop, I love our Church. I can see how we have to move in the direction that Jesus points us, not necessarily what we want. This won't come easy. We can't simply stick a sign out front that says "The Episcopal Church Welcomes You" and think people will flock in ... it takes more than that ... it takes us making the necessary changes to make it happen.

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Friday night, Diane and I went to the Walnut Street Theater to see a new play, “The Eclectic Society.” It was the story of a 60s college fraternity that was going through the abrupt changes of time. There were the issues of war, racism, sexuality and social justice swarming all around them. The biggest challenge was the admittance of a young black man as a pledge ... and the resistance to allowing him to be a member. Most of the resistance came from those who spoke of “traditions” ... or the rules that had so long governed the frat.

I saw in the play a parallel to what our own Church is struggling with today. Change is always something we want others to do, but not ourselves. We think it would be so much easier if everyone would just do it the way we want ... but too often our way does not match God’s desire. Beware those who resist change! Beware those who want the status quo, use the argument of traditions ... all too often resulting in excluding others from the grace that is offered. It things were so great in the life of Israel, why did Jesus even have to come? No ... Jesus said that a change in direction was necessary ... or death would follow.

Maybe the same thing is true for us today. Jesus comes and says, be open to others. Put God first. Take risks for the sake of the Kingdom of God. People are more important than practices. Life and hope are within our grasp ... if we are willing to change direction. There is a poignant moment in the play when the president of the frat is arguing with the young black pledge. “But we were a society founded by abolitionists in 1837!” The black man replies, “Then why did it take you until 1967 to admit a black member?” Too often, our inaction ... our unwillingness to consider another direction ... leads us down a darker, despairing path.

Here we are in Lent, and Jesus comes to us as our judge. He makes us uncomfortable where we are. Disasters are all around us, and some of us are even part of them. Are we being punished? Jesus says, No ...but unless we repent, change direction, we will perish, die. The challenge for us today is to consider how we might change, what direction we might follow, that will more faithfully align us with God.

Jesus seems clear on his insistence ... how will we live it out? What comes to mind for me is turning ... to turn from self and towards others. To turn from all the temptations of this world and to God. To turn to paying attention to our souls, and not our desires. Change direction means to reorient ourselves.

Do we want a church that is alive and growing? Then we need to change direction. It’s time to put God first and live like we mean it. Do we want lives that meaningful and happy? Then we need to change direction. It’s time to stop thinking things we are fulfilling and that what matters are our relationships with God and each other.

During the Convention, other things came to mind about how to be the Church today. What Episcopal Churches are growing? The ones that concentrate on welcoming people, reaching out to others in need, deepening the spirituality of each member ... these are the places where growth happens. One of the best questions we might ask ourselves as

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Christians is, “Where and who can we help bring Christ to right now? How might we do that?”

Another major discussion at convention was money. It’s time for a change in direction there as well. We adopted a resolution calling us to be tithers. Do we know that most of our money problems would be resolved if we just tithed to the Church? At the Diocesan level, this would mean fully funding the missions and a second bishop on the staff. For us here at Grace Church, if we would change in this direction, it would mean we give our full fair share to the Diocese, we would fund another full time priest and Mother Debbie wouldn’t be leaving, and the medical clinic in Camden would be built now.

We need a change in direction where we start putting God first in our lives. One of the joys at convention was seeing Jessie Orlando honored in the program, for being part of this Diocese for 90 years ... and she’s still going strong! Our work doesn’t finish just we become older. For all our members, we need your time and participation as well! Where else can we be part of what’s needed? Where else can we change direction?

It all comes back to Jesus’ words this morning. Something different has to happen ... or we will simply perish. A change of heart, a change of mind, moving in a different direction so we might be more faithful to Jesus are all part of the challenge this morning. It’s a matter of life ... or death. We can’t simply continue the way we have ... it’s not working. Do we really love this Church? Are we really followers of Jesus? If so ... we have a lot of soul searching to do ... right now. What we decide and what we do will make all the difference ... it’s a matter of changing direction or dying. What’s your choice?