

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 3rd Sunday of Lent, March 24, 2019.

One of the things you and I dislike a whole lot is being lectured to. Even when we know we deserve a message, we hate the message. And when it comes anyway, we are quick to say “I know, I know, you don’t have to tell me over and over again. I get it. I was wrong. Please, let’s move on.”

This is how Moses felt in our first lesson today (**Exodus 3:1-15**). “God also said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’” This is how the Corinthians felt in our second lesson today (**I Corinthians 10:1-13**). “We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents.” And this is how some of the Galileans felt in our third lesson today (**Luke 13:1-9**). “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

All were lectured to. And by some pretty powerful forces. It is the Lord talking to Moses. It is Paul talking to the Corinthians. And it is Jesus talking to the Galileans.

So, what’s our response to being dressed down? Well, we don’t argue. We’ve been down that route before, and we don’t get far. Rather, we acknowledge the reality expressed in today’s Collect: “Almighty God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.”

So, if not ourselves, to whom do we turn? Well, we turn to the Source of the dress-down. In the case of God, we don’t look beyond God. We look to God. From today’s Psalm (**Psalm 63:1-8**): “For you have been my helper, God, and under the shadow of your wings I will rejoice.”

One of the basics for people of Faith is that we acknowledge our mistakes. Mistakes are the price of freedom. Most of the time, we exercise our freedom in positive ways, but not all the time. It’s simply who we are.

Our religious conviction doesn’t hide from this reality. In fact, our religious conviction is grounded in this reality. We know we need help, and we find that help in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, there are many who, like us, acknowledge mistakes, and who seek a fresh start. Like us, they want to exercise their freedom in a more responsible manner. Where people of faith differ is the Source of this fresh start. You and I believe that God, the Creator of the Universe, is the Source. What is the Source for those who don't acknowledge God? Other than God, who has the capacity to forgive? I don't mean individual mistakes. We can do that for one another. No, I mean forgiveness at a much deeper, much broader, much more inclusive level. We are fallen creatures. The Biblical name for that level of mistake is Sin, with a capital S. Who can deal with that level of mistake? We can't. Who then can?

Here's an exercise for you. Pick a search engine and enter "forgiveness of Sin." One of the first options I discovered is not forgiveness of Sin, but sun relief, as in easing the pain of a sun burn. The Search engine assumes you're inquiring about sun, not Sin.

When you press on, you realize that all of the options for forgiveness of Sin with a capital S have a Biblical tie. There doesn't appear to be an option other than the Bible, to address Sin with a capital S.

And yet this is what we're after. Something, Someone, to hear our confession as creatures who misuse freedom from time to time and to grant forgiveness. Not just listen, but absolve. Clergy hear confessions, but clergy don't grant their own forgiveness. Rather they remind us of God's forgiveness.

Now, there are many options for helping us get through tough times and understand more fully why we do or don't do certain things. There are professionals and friends who offer to investigate what it is that is bothering us. And there are self-improvement options available. But even when we make progress in this arena, we don't confront the deepest issue, which is our nature to misuse freedom. There might be related issues, but not the basic issue of Sin with a capital S.

This morning's lesson from Exodus tells of a conversation between God and Moses. This is not a visit to a professional. This is a conversation with the Creator of the Universe. And notice who is doing most of the talking. It is not Moses. "God said to Moses, I am who I am. ... This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations."

Counseling sessions often begin with the counselor saying something like “Tell me how you’re feeling.” The Exodus conversation begins and ends with the Lord saying “Listen to me.” There are many times when the Lord will listen to us. But, when it comes to basics, like Sin with a capital S, the Lord expects us to listen.

And that’s a good thing. Indeed, that’s the Good News. The Lord cares so much about us that He or She, whatever the pronoun, doesn’t let us wallow in our shortcomings. Without Forgiveness with a capital F, you and I would be in a lot bigger mess than we are right now.

This is the point that St. Paul makes to the Corinthians. “So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall. No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.”

What an interesting definition of Forgiveness with a capital F: a “way out.” A way-out of what? A means of dealing with our nature to get ourselves in trouble.

What other options, what other way-outs, are available? Yes, we can say, “I’m sorry,” and others can say, “It’s okay, I forgive you.” But this exchange, as important as it is, as welcome as it is, doesn’t get down to the basic issue of human nature. If we are really sorry for what we have done and concerned that we will fall short again, which we will, “it’s okay” isn’t sufficient.

We need to go to the One who created us with free will in the first place, who made it possible to get ourselves into this mess. We need to return to the Source of that free will, which we manage to abuse more times than we like to admit.

In today’s gospel, Jesus shares a parable about a fig tree. Note that he shares this parable right after he tells his listeners “But unless you repent, you will all perish.” They had been complaining to Jesus that they were being lumped in with really bad sinners, as opposed to no-so-bad sinners. Jesus sets them straight.

In the parable there are two characters: the owner of the garden and the gardener. The owner is upset because the tree has not produced fruit for three

straight years. The owner's response is to order the tree to be cut down. Get rid of it. The gardener, however, begs the owner not to cut down the tree. "Give me another year to nourish the tree, and then see if you still want to cut it down."

Another year. Just one more year. A way-out. Nourishment is the key. And not just any nourishment, but nourishment from the One who created fig trees to begin with and who created owners to sponsor the fig trees and gardeners to care for fig trees. There is a solution. Go to the Source. Not a band-aid, but Forgiveness with a capital F.

There is no solution better than, deeper than, more lasting than, asking God for another chance and accepting God's forgiveness. Asking is one element. Accepting is another. And it's not a one-time fix. It's a way of life. It's why you and I gather regularly. And, if we ignore this time with God, it's why we return.

We know, we discover, we re-discover that "we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves." Today's Collect is right on target. But God can help. God can address this condition. Indeed God has already done so. The greatest gift in this world is ours for the receiving and, lest we forget, the sharing. From today's Psalm: "For your loving-kindness, O Lord, is better than life itself; my lips shall give you praise."

And what is our message? Pretty simple: If you are looking for a fresh start, go to the Source. Amen.