

3d SUNDAY OF LENT – C (March 7, 2010)
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How many times have you experienced something like this? You ask your child to clean up his room, get the homework done, or take out the garbage. You check later on and find out that the room is still a mess, the homework sits unopened on the floor, and the garbage is still in the kitchen. You ask, with perhaps a touch of exasperation in your voice, “what are you waiting for?” Or your boss or supervisor at work asks you to do something that is indeed a part of your job but that you really don’t like to do...and so you put it off or make all kinds of excuses, until the boss comes around and asks “so what are you waiting for?” Or the IRS tells you “make sure you pay your income taxes by April 15”...there is over a month left for you to do so, but you still put it off until that last, most frustrating moment on April 15 and ask yourself “what was I waiting for??”

There are so many things we need to do in life, so many things we know we ought to do—whether at home, with family, on the job or in many other circumstances—but it can be so easy to put it off, to find reasons or excuses for delays or to not do it at all. That can even happen in the spiritual life, in our relationship with God. The first reading today gives us a prime example: the story of Moses’ encounter with God in the burning bush. God reveals himself to Moses and charges him with the task of leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Our reading, however, is only a brief excerpt of a rather lengthy dialogue that takes place between them. The full text from Exodus has Moses coming up with excuse after excuse why he shouldn’t be the one: he is not worthy of the task, he doesn’t know God’s name in case the Israelites ask him that, the Israelites won’t even listen to him, he doesn’t know how to speak with any power or eloquence, and on and on. It’s almost rather comical—Moses is trying any and every excuse he can think of to get out of this admittedly daunting task. Finally, he cries out: “If you please, Lord, send someone else!” He doesn’t want to do it—it’s as simple as that! But God doesn’t give up; he answers every excuse and complaint on Moses’ part and assures Moses that he will receive the divine wisdom and power he needs for the task God gives him. In effect, God tells Moses: “enough excuses; go on now—what are you waiting for?”

How often it can be the same with us. God spoke to Moses with a sense of urgency about the important work to be done in Egypt...Jesus likewise spoke to his followers and he speaks to us with a similar sense of urgency about our need for repentance and conversion. In the gospel today Jesus warned the people more than once that if they did not repent of their sins, they would perish as did the Galileans killed by Pilate and the victims in Siloam. His parable of the fig tree had a similar message—the barren tree would be given an opportunity to bear more fruit in the future; but if it didn’t, it would then be cut down. No more excuses, no more reasons for waiting.

We are well into Lent now—already at the third Sunday of this holy season. We know this season is a special opportunity of grace in which we are called by God to turn away from sin, especially those sins and that selfishness that we really enjoy or really don’t want to have to give up. And yet...how easy it is to make excuses, to put off that conversion to which we know God is calling us. We become another Moses—finding all kinds of reasons for saying ‘no’ to God’s call. “I can’t change...why should I give this up when everyone else is doing it?...what God asks is too hard...I don’t want to!” Despite the obvious power of God and of his desire to help us by his grace to grow in holiness, goodness and love, we’d rather dig our heels in the sand.

And that can be particularly true regarding that especially powerful gift Jesus gave us—the sacrament of reconciliation. Confession is one of the two great sacraments of healing, the other being the sacrament of anointing of the sick which we will celebrate at the Masses next weekend (make sure and see the announcement in today’s bulletin that indicates who can receive this sacrament). Lent is the most appropriate time of the whole year in which to take part and rejoice in the spiritual healing and peace that

comes from sacramental confession. You know that I have spoken before and at some length about this, encouraging us all to make a good confession especially in Lent—and I'm not going to repeat all of that. However, I do want to address very briefly what is probably the most common complaint: "why do I have to confess my sins to a priest? Why can't I go directly to God?" Of course we can talk directly to God and ask him to forgive us; I hope we do that every day. But Jesus clearly gave the apostles a direct role in the forgiveness of sins (John ch. 20 removes all doubt on that point), and the presence of this sacrament in the history of the Church since the time of the apostles only confirms that role. To be sure, confession is not the easiest or most comfortable thing to do; I'm sure that has a lot to do with why we can find so many reasons not to use this sacrament or to wait so long before doing so.

It's important to know that this sacrament goes by three different names because each one highlights a different and important aspect of its healing work:

--confession: in order to turn away from sin, we have to both know and admit to our own particular sins, where we specifically choose to do wrong or refuse to do good. That is why it is important to examine our conscience—to remember those specific actions or attitudes that we know full well are not what God wants of us but that we nevertheless freely choose. And it's so important to name them; while it's true to say "Lord, forgive me for I have sinned", we need to acknowledge and confess and state the details. And so we confess our specific sins to the priest, he who represents Christ and who speaks Jesus' words of forgiveness and absolution.

--penance: we not only confess and acknowledge our sins, but we also recognize the fact that our sins, our selfish failures do harm to our relationship with God and with others. And so it is important that we take some steps to heal that break in the relationship, to show our intent and our resolve to do better in the future. That is why the priest will give a penance—some form of prayer or good deed to give a specific form to that renewed intent and resolve to grow in holiness and love.

--reconciliation: having confessed our sins with true sorrow and having resolved to cooperate with God's grace to do better in the future, we celebrate and rejoice in the fact that we are fully one with God once again; we are reconciled to him. Husbands and wives, parents and children, you know what it's like to experience pain and anger when something happens to disturb your relationships with each other...and then you know the genuine joy, gladness and relief that comes about when you are able to patch things up. How much more profoundly true that is when we are reconciled to God precisely through this sacrament of reconciliation! So many times over my years as a priest and a confessor it happens: after someone's good and sincere confession (especially if it had been a long time since the last confession, I'll be praying the prayer of absolution...and it's almost as if I can visibly see a huge weight being lifted off that person's shoulders and a big smile often comes across their face. It's a beautiful thing! They know once again the unconditional love and mercy of God—it's a priceless gift.

In the bulletin today you will also find a list of communal penance services with individual confessions that will be held in the Waterloo area during the rest of Lent along with a list of the extra times for individual confessions here at St. Edward during this season in addition to the regular confession times. If you are one of those who knows that confession would be a good thing for you but you keep coming up with what you think are good reasons or excuses not to go, I encourage and challenge you to take the opportunity during this Lenten season to avail yourself of this sacrament. After all, what are you waiting for??

