

Third Sunday in Lent
Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9
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GOING ORGANIC

We seem to be addicted to fast. Fast food. Fast lanes. Fast computers. The spiritual discipline of fasting—going without, restraint, living with less—well, it’s almost unimaginable for us. The current *Newsweek* has a rather prophetic title for an article: “We the Problem.” The problem isn’t Washington, it’s us—our “got mine” culture of entitlement. For the past 30 years we’ve lived as if there is no tomorrow. It’s unthinkable for politicians to ask us to even make short-term sacrifices for long-term rewards.

So in Lent we confess our self-indulgent appetites and ways, to quote the Ash Wednesday liturgy. The pride, envy, hypocrisy and apathy that have infected our lives. Our waste and pollution of creation. Our lack of concern for those who come after us.

From today’s first reading: “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” Or to paraphrase: Why do we spend our money on junk food, and why do we chase after dreams and illusions that, in the end, will not bring us security or peace of mind?

Start with the food we eat. About ninety percent of the average American’s food budget is spent on processed food. It’s packaged, stamped and dated. We give thanks to God as the giver of food. But the wrapper says who made it: Jewel, Libby, Dole or the elves at the Keebler tree house. Michael Pollan wrote a book entitled, “In Defense of Food.” He says that much of what we eat isn’t real food, but highly processed food-like substances. If your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize it as food, it probably isn’t, Pollan says. So if you’re at the grocery store and you see a box of “Go-Gurt,” think again. Go-Gurt is portable yogurt tubes that you or your kids are to squirt in their mouths on the run. Yogurt is a very simple food; Go-Gurt has dozens of added ingredients.

Pollan knows it takes a lot of work to tell the difference between fast, fake and fun food, and real food. His advice, in seven words: “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”

It sounds like Stephanie Paulsell’s advice in our Lenten book, *Honoring the Body*. Make choices that honor our bodies and the bodies of others. Choices that reflect God’s intention that there be enough for all. Her ideas: Fast from fast food. Eat less meat. Pay attention to the body’s hunger and eat no more than we need to satisfy it. Don’t let food go to waste. Really eat those five fruits and vegetables a day. And never eat without giving thanks.

Sounds like a call to go organic and natural in the ways we shop and eat. But it goes much further than that. We’ve lost our connection to the earth. To where our food comes from. To the source of our nourishment. After all, most of us are multi-tasking most of the time. Our eyes on computer and smart phone screens. Our ears attached to iPods. Add traffic, density and over-stimulation. No wonder we miss the simple gifts of the earth: the sun, the clouds, the rain, the buds. No wonder we treat food as fuel for our bodies, rather than gift and nourishment. No wonder we over-indulge, yet feel so empty.

Are we that different from our ancestors that Paul writes about in First Corinthians? Have we not stuffed ourselves with excess? Turned to gadgets as our gods? Things as our idols? And then we complain and whine. We wonder what has happened to our bodies. To the earth. To our country. To the church. And rather than taking any personal responsibility, we blame the congress, the president, greedy Wall Street, conservative Christians. You fill in the blank.

In today’s gospel, Jesus puts it rather bluntly: Repent or perish. We are naturally wired to think that illness, suffering and natural calamities are God’s punishment. Yet Jesus has a way of equalizing that way of thinking. Bad things just happen. Life is risky. So repent. Turn your lives around. Think in a new way.

And then Jesus gives us a very organic image: the fig tree. The only tree mentioned in the garden of paradise. A symbol of God’s blessing of the land of Israel, and a sign of the promised land.

There seems to be a problem. For three years there has been no fruit on the fig tree. Should it be cut down? The gardener says: absolutely not. Be patient. Give it another year. And then do something very organic. Put manure on it.

God seems to be very patient with our impatience. With our addiction to fast. With our addiction to idols.

Going organic may be a Lenten invitation to be more connected to the earth and to our bodies. But it's also a call to go deeper. Rather than eating so much processed food, what if we actually "processed" our lives? Reflected on the parts of our lives that make us uncomfortable? That are challenging and painful?

Maybe we should meditate on something in our gospel that's a bit non-traditional: manure! William Clearly writes "Among the mysteries of life is the mystery of manure, how awful it smells, how disgusting it looks, how repulsive it feels—yet how delicious it is to our vegetable cousins in the garden. They not only welcome it, but they take it in, and through the life powers within them, absorb its very substance into their individual beings, transforming its smelly and disgusting substance miraculously into bright shining red tomatoes, yellow luscious corn, sweet wholesome carrots."

Buddhists would remind us that the lotus blooms in muddy waters. Can we be with the mud, the earth, the manure? Can we trust that out of these dark places new life will bloom? Can we believe that our very transformation comes from a place of mystery that we can't quite name or understand?

As we strain toward Easter, we repent of our addiction to fast food and to quick, fast answers to life's struggles and questions. We fast and pray. As the spring equinox approaches, we turn our hearts toward the sun of God's mercy and forgiveness.

And as we wait, we relish these words from Isaiah. Words for this Lord's Day, and images of the Easter Vigil yet to come: "All you who thirst come to the waters. All who are hungry come to the table. Eat what is good. Delight yourselves in rich food."