

**FROM DEATH TO LIFE: WORKS IN PROGRESS II**  
**1CORINTHIANS 10:1-13; LUKE 13:1-9**  
**MARCH 14, 2004, LENT III, ANNUAL MEETING**  
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I want to talk with you again this week about repentance and about our being works in progress. You and I and this congregation, like works of art, are works in progress.

Last week we said very few pieces of art, if any, are created in their final form at first writing or composing or sketching. The artist works over time with inspiration to create a painting or poem or song. Then the artist decides to frame the painting or perform the symphony. But some say works of art are never finished.

You might say we are like that. God tinkering with and tweaking us toward the full dream God has for each one of us – to the extent that we discern God’s leading and follow it in our lives. The goal of the Christian life is to be Christ-like, but we are never finished.

There is no point where we become perfect as Christians. You may laugh but the ‘holiness’ movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed spiritual perfection was possible.

Attaining perfection sounds presumptuous but in our way we want perfection too. I want to challenge perfection today. The idea that we can make ourselves, our children, our homes and workplaces perfect. Martha Stewart got rich selling that idea. She also met her demise trying to defend it. But there are worse forms.

You see, if we were perfect we would no longer need to repent.

So I want to address the importance of repentance this morning also.

As old as the question of evil and suffering is the question of perfection and power. It was behind Adam and Eve’s eating the apple of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They wanted to be perfect like God. All-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful.

Today’s equivalent is genetic engineering. Designer children, for example. Mixing and matching DNA to come up with kids who meet someone’s idea of perfect – athletic giftedness, academic prowess, whatever. Or maybe bionic athletes. Just as Roger Maris has an asterisk next to his name in the all-time home run column because even though he broke Babe Ruth’s record it took him more games to do it. We may need to asterisk the names of people like Barry Bonds who broke records if we discover they used performance enhancing drugs to do it.

Yes, the fruit of the tree of perfection is as tempting today as ever.

A recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* says to understand why things like designer children, bionic athletes and genetic engineering are detrimental we have to confront a religious question no one is asking these days.

It is this: what is the proper stance of human beings toward the given world? The moral quandary arises when bio-technologies are used not to cure disease but reach beyond health. When people lift themselves beyond the norm.

Genetic engineering, performance enhancing drugs, some kinds of cosmetic surgery represent the triumph of willfulness over giftedness, of dominion over reverence, of molding over beholding.

I belong to a men's group that gathers monthly to deliver "papers" to one another. I am in this group by virtue of being pastor of this great church. It's lots of fun.

Last week, Keith Frome, head of the Elmwood Franklin School talked about the pitfalls of perfect parenting. He described different kinds of parents – the romantic parent, who sees every moment of his child's life as a precious moment; the dutiful parent who follows a recipe of 'shoulds' for raising children; or the narcissistic parent who approaches parenting with the question 'what did my parents do for me' and makes the child a mere extension of herself.

Keith invited us to consider what he calls religious parenting. The parent who embodies all of these: romance, duty and self-reference but goes beyond them. The parent who embraces humility, reverence and courage facing the challenges of parenting.

In a world that prizes mastery and control parenthood, said Keith, is a school for humility. It calls for spiritual wisdom. The fact that we care deeply about our children and yet cannot choose the kind of kids we want teaches parents to be open to surprise, to sorrow, to joy. We learn to live with, if not welcome, the unbidden.

The gift of seeing ourselves and our children as creatures of God, and not someone's blueprint is that we are not completely responsible for the way we are. The more alive we are to the chance of our lot in life, the more reason we have to share our fate with others. To bond with others. At 5'9" I was not headed for a basketball career. I was motivated to compensate by lifting weights to play sports.

Genetic engineering, performance enhancing drugs, cosmetic surgery, the idea of perfection, make it harder for us to foster the moral sentiments we need to accept ourselves and one another. That is, to get along together.

What is the proper stance of men and women to the given, created order of life? I am saying today, it is not mastery, control and perfection, but admitting we are 'works in progress,' flawed creatures who depend upon one another and God to find our way.

Today's biblical lessons agree. Behind Paul's warnings from Israel's history and Jesus' refusal to give the crowds a formula for avoiding suffering is the question, 'what stance shall we take to the given world, the created order where people suffer and die?' In other words, the people were asking 'can we manipulate life to avoid suffering and win a spiritual blue ribbon?'

In Corinthians, Paul warns against thinking I'm doing a good job so God must be impressed. Just because they obeyed Moses and observed sacred rituals did not save many of his followers from dying in the wilderness.

In Luke, Jesus says, like the famous bumper sticker, suffering happens.

We will never figure out the theological physics and mystery of suffering. Trying to figure that out say Jesus and Paul is neither possible nor worth our time. What we can do they say, however – because God's judgement does occur – is to repent.

But who repents today? The word is almost gone from our language.

I don't mean to over emphasize or under emphasize repentance this morning.

Just to say any who assume they have advanced beyond temptation and don't need to repent should think again.

So what are we saying? First, given the advances of bio-technology we may be tempted to think we can create and lead perfect lives. And second, because of the culture of mastery and control in which we live we may think that repentance is unneeded.

But the great paradox of our time is that the more advanced we become the more apparent it is that we cannot control and create perfect people. Despite the great affluence and scientific sophistication of this nation and the western world the spiritual hunger and loneliness of our time is as deep as ever.

The good news in today's biblical lessons is that repentance is the way out of spiritual brokenness. Repentance leads to wholeness and health.

Life in the kingdom of God is not a game of gaining holy favors and avoiding real losses. Nor is it a search for some genetic grail or bio-technical bullet to make us immune from suffering.

Men and women and children will always be works in progress. Flawed creations who move toward wholeness to the extent that we approach our relationships and work and families with humility and trust.

One of the biggest obstacles that gets in the way of my repenting is thinking my life would be better if others did it. Members of my family or colleagues or city or world leaders. But the fact is I am the only one I can be responsible for when it comes to repentance which is not just about the quality of my life but my relationship to God. Focussing on others' need to repent is a convenient way of avoiding the work I have to do.

Someone said repentance is like using a comb. It shouldn't be obvious that you do, but if you don't everyone will know it.

Avoiding the hard work of spiritual growth through humility and repentance turns our lives into bad hair days and makes us stick out like sore thumbs.

It is Annual Meeting Sunday. We have a lot on our plate as a congregation – a new Sunday morning schedule, stewardship challenges, big hairy audacious goals for mission. None of it will matter much if we don't take seriously the Bible's admonition to repent.

I'll never forget a spiritual mentor of mine years ago. I thought he had just about reached perfection. Kind, gracious, inspiring. When I told him so, he had the wisdom not to say 'aw shucks that's a nice thing to say.' Rather he told me he struggled every day and fell far short of living a more Christ-like life. He said his daily prayer was to ask God to forgive his stubbornness, his pride, his arrogance and then to move on with his life. I got the sense living the Christian life actually became harder not easier for him, the more he grew in his faith.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree says God unaccountably gives each of us additional time for repentance. The door is open – for a while. God's mercy is still in serious conversation with God's judgement. There is little better we can do for ourselves and this community than own our shortcomings, ask God's and our neighbor's forgiveness and get on with life.

If the church is about anything it is about supporting one another in those endeavors.

After 2,000 years, we're still a work in progress. Amen.