

Father O'Connor's Homily on 23 March 2025
Third Sunday of Lent-C

Exodus 3: 1-8a, 13-15
1 Corinthians 10: 1-6, 10-12
Luke 13: 1-9

Jesus tells a parable today that is so fitting for this Third Sunday of Lent. He takes us to an orchard. The owner of the orchard says to the gardener, "For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?"

The gardener says to him in reply, "Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it. It may bear fruit in the future. If not, you can cut it down."

This parable is so appropriate for this season of Lent. We are looking at our lives to see what kind of fruit we are producing for the Lord. We ask ourselves, "Is my life fruitful enough?" And I think that the honest answer for so many of us is, "No, not just yet."

So what can we do about it? In this Lenten season, we are invited to cooperate with the grace the Lord offers to cultivate the ground of our lives and to fertilize it so that we *can* produce more fruit. That is why we are here today, yes?

This is a time of transformation – a time of conversion and growth – and we all need it. And this season of Lent is full of opportunities.

Do you know where the word "Lent" comes from? It is from an Old English word ["lencten"] that means "the lengthening of days." It comes from the daylight hours getting longer during this spring season. The plants are coming to life, and so we cultivate and fertilize them, and hope that they will produce abundantly.

Lent is a time for transformation – for conversion and growth – for all of us, as those in OCIA [Order for the Christian Initiation of Adults] prepare for Easter sacraments [Baptism or a Profession of Faith, Confirmation and First Holy Communion] and as we prepare to renew our own baptismal promises at Easter.

On the First Sunday of Lent, those in OCIA in our Diocese of Cleveland met with Bishop Malesic at Public Auditorium for the Rite of Election [for Catechumens preparing for Baptism] and the Rite for the Calling of Candidates to Continuing Conversion [for those already baptized

in another Christian church who would like to become members of our Catholic Church family].

From Saint Joseph Parish we have three catechumens: Cole Williams, Hope Sadowski and Sam Oney. And one candidate: Christian Loo.

For our Diocese of Cleveland, there were 812 people present with Bishop Malesic that Sunday afternoon seeking Easter sacraments: 431 catechumens and 381 candidates, plus their families and OCIA team members.

To give you some perspective as to how we are doing as a diocese with welcoming new members into our Catholic Church family, here are the numbers from some other dioceses in the United States for this same ceremony with their Bishops on the First Sunday of Lent:

Baltimore: 778 people seeking Easter sacraments

Detroit: 927 people

Philadelphia: 726 people

San Francisco: 653 people

and Cleveland: 812 people [second on this list of 5, after Detroit]

Transformation rarely occurs in a single instant. Our transformation, our call to continuing conversion, is a life-long process. And how is it cultivated and fertilized? Well, of course with God's grace, and with many little ongoing acts of love and faithfulness to our God and to our neighbors.

There is a story that makes this point in, perhaps, a more memorable fashion. The author's words are so carefully written that I am not going to attempt to paraphrase them. So here is the story.

A night-shift taxi cab driver, on a late August night, was responding to a call from a small brick complex in a quiet part of town. He assumed that, as usual, he was being sent to pick up some hung-over partiers or someone who just had a fight with a lover, or a worker heading to an early shift in the industrial part of town.

When he arrived at 2:30 AM the building was dark except for a single light in a ground-floor window. Now, under the circumstances, most drivers would just honk once or twice, wait a minute, and then drive away. But this cabbie was different. He got out, walked to the door, and knocked.

"Just a minute," answered a frail, elderly voice.

He could hear something being dragged across the floor and, after a long pause, the door opened. There was a small woman in her eighties wearing a blue print-dress and a pillbox hat with a veil pinned on it, looking like somebody out of a 1940s movie. By her side was a small suitcase.

He got a glimpse of the apartment that looked as if no one had lived in it for years. The furniture was covered with sheets. There were no clocks, knickknacks or utensils on the counters. In the corner was a cardboard box filled with photos and glassware.

“Would you carry my bag to the car?” the woman asked. So he took the suitcase to the cab, then returned to assist the woman who took his arm as they walked slowly to the curb. When they got into the cab, she gave him an address, and then asked, “Could you drive through downtown?”

“It’s not the shortest way,” he answered.

“Oh, I don’t mind,” she said. “I’m in no hurry. I’m on my way to a hospice facility.” When he looked into the rearview mirror he noticed her eyes were glistening. “I don’t have any family left,” she continued. “And the doctor says that I don’t have very long to live.”

The cabbie then quietly reached over and shut off the meter. “What route would you like to take?” he asked.

For the next three hours, they drove through the city. They pulled up in front of a furniture warehouse that had once been a ballroom where she had gone dancing as a girl. She showed him the building where she had once worked as an elevator operator. They drove through the neighborhood where she and her husband had lived when they were newlyweds. Sometimes she would ask the cabbie to slow down in front of a particular building or corner and would sit staring into the darkness, saying nothing.

As the first hint of sun was lighting up the horizon, she suddenly said, “I’m tired. Let’s go now.”

They drove in silence to the hospice facility. Two orderlies came out to the cab. They were solicitous and intent, watching her every move. They were obviously expecting her.

The cabbie opened the trunk and took the small suitcase to the door. The woman was already seated in a wheelchair. “How much do I owe you?” she asked, reaching into her purse.

“Nothing,” he said.

“You have to make a living,” she protested.

“There are other passengers,” he responded.

Almost without thinking, he bent over and gave her a hug and a kiss. She held him tightly. “You just gave an old woman a little moment of joy,” she said. “Thank you.” He squeezed her hand then walked into the dim morning light.

Behind him, a door shut. It was the sound of the closing of a life.

(Now here is how the cabbie finished his story.)

“I didn’t pick up any more passengers that shift. I drove aimlessly, lost in thought. For the rest of that day, I could hardly talk. What if that woman had gotten an angry driver, or one who was impatient to end his shift? What if I had refused to take the run, or had honked once, then driven away? But now, on a quick review, I don’t think that I have ever done anything more important in my life.”

Then he added a capsule of this homily. He said, “We are conditioned to think that our lives revolve around the great moments. But what are truly great moments can often catch us unaware: beautifully wrapped in what others may consider to be just a very small and ordinary one.”

Our transformation – our continuing conversion and growth as disciples of Jesus – is the goal of Lent and, with God’s grace, it is so often the seemingly small acts that take us there. Like the night-shift taxi cab driver responding to a routine early-morning call, and transporting an elderly lady on a journey that turned out to be anything-but-ordinary for him, and for her.

So watch for that next opportunity for your own transformation. At the moment it might seem to be something so small and ordinary. But it can turn out to be something great and extraordinary – and ultimately very memorable – in your own life’s journey and, perhaps, in someone else’s too.

Fellow disciples of Jesus, these are the things that truly enable us to grow and bear fruit in our lives, abundantly.

Happy Lent, everyone!