

Jesus might write you up for disobeying policies

written by Bishop Anthony B. Taylor |

Bishop Anthony B. Taylor delivered this homily Feb. 28.

For five years, between 1988 and 1993, I was the priest the Archbishop of Oklahoma City sent to parishes that had unexpected vacancies due to the death or illness of their pastor.

In one of these parishes there were conflicts among the employees, so I had to develop policies for handling personnel problems, including discipline and termination. But what was amazing was that once they knew the rules and what their job expectations were — and the consequences of non-compliance — most of them got with the program right away. I did have to write one employee up, but in a way she was actually relieved.

Oftentimes we really don't know what needs to change until we spend some time thinking about it, and that is what Lent is for.

She said, "I really thought you were trying to get rid of me." To which I replied, "No, I'm just trying to get you to do your job and to let the other employees do theirs."

Once she knew what had to change and the consequence of not doing so, she went and did it — and she continued to be employed by the parish for many more years.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his hearers they have to change or face the consequences. He reminds them of two recent tragedies: 1) Pilate's massacre of worshippers at the temple, and 2) the 18 killed in the collapse of a building in Jerusalem. People generally thought that if bad things happened, the victims probably deserved it somehow.

Jesus says, That's not how it works. But for the grace of God, it could just as well have been you. Do you think they were greater sinners than you just "because they suffered these things? Certainly not!" Indeed, if tragedy is punishment for sin, then "you will all come to the same end unless you reform."

Jesus is writing them up, putting them on notice, telling them what will happen if they don't make the necessary changes.

And what is true regarding conversion from sin also applies to the requirement that we produce fruit worthy of the Lord. In business, it's not enough that employees avoid bad behavior; they can also be terminated for failing to produce, failing to meet their quotas.

In the second half of today's Gospel Jesus uses his parable of the Barren Fig Tree to say that we'd better produce. A man had a fig tree that produced nothing and so was probably barren. They really should just cut it down — terminate it — and plant another, but they decide to give it one last chance. They will fertilize it and give it special care, but if after one more year it still doesn't produce, they'll have to cut it down for sure. Good farmland is too valuable to leave cluttered with non-producing plants.

Jesus' teachings here apply directly to the goals and purpose of Lent: that we reform our lives and begin to produce good fruit worthy of the Lord. The Kingdom of God is open to everyone, but there are standards; conditions of membership.

Jesus' hope is that once we know the rules and what the job expectations are — and the consequences of non-compliance — that we'll get with the program right away. But if we're slow to respond, Jesus may have to write us up. He gives us chances to change our behavior, puts us on notice in an effort to get our attention, gives us special care in the hope that we will finally begin to produce.

Do you know what needs to change in your life? That employee I wrote up didn't have a clue. It was obvious to everyone but her. Oftentimes we really don't know what needs to change until we spend some time thinking about it, and that is what Lent is for.

Are there sinful behaviors that you've just sort of made your peace with, knowing full well that these deeds or attitudes are not worthy of the Lord? Think about it! Are there things in your past that you bitterly regret, for which you need God's forgiveness? Or things in the present that you still need to set right? Today's Gospel tells us what will happen if we don't make the necessary changes. We will all come to a bad end unless we reform.

What kind of fruit is your life producing right now? Is it fruit that you'd be proud to present to the Lord on Judgment Day? Is it the fruit of kindness, compassion, generosity and self-sacrifice; or the fruit of pride, jealousy, greed and selfishness? Jesus says, "By their fruits you shall know them." Lent is a time for us to look inside and ask ourselves these kinds of questions.