

FROM DEATH TO LIFE: WORKS IN PROGRESS I
GENESIS 15: 1-12, 17-18; LUKE 13: 31-35
MARCH 7, 2004 – LENT TWO
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I'll never forget taking a sculpture class in college. We created three pieces – one welded from metal; a clay bust of a human subject; the last a plaster of Paris creation.

That's the one I struggled with. We built the piece in general proportion and shape from wet plaster, let it dry, then carved and filed it from the dried plaster into our finished form.

While my creation was drying the professor, a large man from Texas, gifted sculptor and sporting a southern drawl and cowboy boots, was working the room offering advice to students. When he came to my table he looked at a protruding piece of plaster, frowned and said, "this looks like a wart on a hog's nose," then yanked off the offending protrusion.

Turning to my table-mate, after the professor had gone on to terrorize someone else, I said, "I guess this is a work in progress."

We are in week two of a Lenten sermon series entitled, "From Death to Life." I want to talk with you today about works in progress. There are very few artistic creations that are finished the first time, without the artist ever tweaking or overhauling them again. Hemingway, for example, was famous for rewriting. He reputedly rewrote the ending to *Farewell To Arms* 39 times.

Maybe Mozart got it completely right the first time once or twice. But typically art happens in process as the writer or painter allows the Spirit of life and their imagination to go to work. This takes discipline and honesty and a willingness to throw away what you started and begin again. But of course you never start over completely because even the initial 'not-getting-it-right' is an actual step in the creative process.

After the professor dismantled my sculpture, it opened a door. I was able to see what I was trying to do in an entirely new way. I let go of the puny, small-minded idea I was messing around with, started thinking big and tried something radically different.

One of the operating principles for these sermons in Lent is the similarity between art and faith, between the creative process of writing or painting or dancing or making music and the creative process of living your life.

What I would like to explore with you today is the notion that we are each works in progress, you and I. This is an important theological notion. The idea that we can, with God's help, make and remake who we are not unlike my sculpture experience or Hemingway's ending to a great novel.

But to some, this notion is unacceptable. For some folks, the truth is people don't change. It explains why some people stay trapped in the hell of addiction. We arrive here in this world fixed at birth, finished. All of life consists of replaying the tapes that were implanted in our brains when we were born. Life consists of determinisms. Once our gender or socioeconomic level has spoken what can anybody do?

Yet, today's stories from Genesis and Luke offer a different viewpoint. In Genesis, God steps into human history and establishes a covenant with Abram through the ancient ceremony of covenant making. In Luke, God is still at it through Jesus. Remaining faithful to God's people. Upholding through Jesus the ancient covenant.

Today's story from Luke comes in two parts. The first depicts the Pharisees warning Jesus that Herod is out to get him. When your enemies start warning you of imminent danger you know you're in big trouble. But Jesus responds to them saying, "go tell that old fox my work is not finished." In other words, he remains focussed on his mission, without regard for his own safety.

Then in the second part of Luke's message, Jesus shifts to a lament for Jerusalem. Jerusalem has turned away from prophetic truth before and may well do so again. But there is still time to repent, to change, to turn around, to get it right.

This past week the Reverend Jeff Carter of Ephesus Ministries on Grider Street spoke in our Lenten Wednesday series. Reverend Carter said that, ministering on the East Side of Buffalo he runs into situations, into people who do not have any hope for a meaningful existence. Which, he said, was the definition of death he once heard a doctor offer.

People unemployed or sick or addicted or suffering from some life circumstance. They are dead so to speak, trapped, he said, without any hope for a meaningful existence because some can't see and some don't know that things can change.

The good news Jesus brings to Jerusalem in the eleventh hour is that change is possible, change can happen, it is never too late. But in order to change there has to be recognition that change is needed. You have to acknowledge you need to turn around. The biblical word is repent.

The story of the Gettysburg Address illustrates this. You may remember the circumstances. The Battle at Gettysburg was one of the worst of the Civil War. Fifty thousand deaths. The carnage was unbelievable. No one really won the conflict.

General Meade, the Union leader happened to have more troops after the battle so he was the de facto winner. General Lee had none left to speak of. Both generals were so demoralized that they submitted their resignations to their commanders in chief. But Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis would not accept the resignations. At issue was interpreting the meaning of the great battle. If one side seemed to lose it would be a moral victory for the other. The fact that Lee appeared at least to survive was something for the south to hold onto.

So each held their chins up like proud prize fighters stumbling to their corners. But the reality check was the burying the dead.

Most of the dead were buried quickly at first because it was July and hot and rotting bodies were a major health hazard. Then, plans were made to design a cemetery, organize the dead by their state of origin, solicit financial and labor assistance from other states, hire a person to oversee all of this and issue bids for thousands of coffins and burial work.

By late summer the director of the project planned the dedication. The day was set for November 19. The great orator Edward Everett was secured. Longfellow and Whittier declined. Their muses silenced by the horror of the battle.

The President was invited to attend to round out the program and give the occasion the appropriate official air of a ceremony of state.

But the main speaker was clearly Everett. His was to be the Gettysburg Address. Lincoln's role in the ceremony came at the end, after Everett had delivered his well researched and decidedly northern-biased, three-hour oration.

Lincoln's part on the program was noted as "President Lincoln's Dedicatory Remarks." But by the time Lincoln concluded his remarks of three minutes the United States had undergone a profound change.

What happened is Lincoln repented. At one of the lowest points of American history he resisted the temptation to take sides. He stayed above the politics of the war and the Battle at Gettysburg that occupied so much of what Everett said. Lincoln focussed on something much larger reinterpreting the meaning of United States' Constitution.

Lincoln took Jefferson's phrase "all men are created equal" and transposed it to mean all persons white and black. Lincoln shifted the meaning of the Civil War from a conflict over states' rights to a conflict over the principle of equality. He transformed the sacred document of democracy into a human rights manifesto.

Others have written about Lincoln's personal evolution on this matter. But he didn't stop there. He brought our Constitution into the modern era – from an age when the nation's founders owned slaves – to a new day when slavery of any kind was condemned. Through repentance, Lincoln transformed a moment of no hope into an occasion of complete hope. That's how he united and saved the nation. The Civil War did not bring the equality Lincoln called for in his great speech; but in his speech Lincoln made equality a guiding principle and vision for us ever since.ⁱ

Not only did the President repent of and change his own attitudes and behavior, he led the way for the nation to do the same – and at just the right moment when hope seemed lost.

It is interesting and maybe a little ironic that we don't associate repentance with church much today. It used to be that church was the place where you went to learn that you were a sinner and were told to repent and change. Today, says one preacher and I agree, we are usually told that we are basically good people who are doing the best we can and the best we can is good enough for God. God loves us just as we are, blemishes and all. Talk of sin is depressing and a put down.ⁱⁱ

But this is not the message of Jesus and the New Testament. Somehow during that dark final week of Jesus' life the people – which included everyone, the authorities, the crowds, his followers, who stand for you and me and people of every age – somehow the people conspired to put him to death by means of a crucifixion. Yet, by God's grace that cross stands as a sign that God forgives us. The good news is repentance means something and leads somewhere – to new life, to getting it right.

When we repent we reconnect with the tattered and battered image of God imprinted in us at birth. We reconnect with God's will, discover God's image written on our hearts. Impossible you say. Precisely. It is as impossible as trying to unlock a door with no key. It has to be done by divine intervention – which we open ourselves to when we repent.

Real hope for meaningful existence comes through the recognition that we need to change and can change with God's help.

When we repent – it's like Hemingway rewriting the ending of a great novel.

Or a young sculptor reshaping a contorted creation into a free flowing form.

Or a great President leading a nation to wider vision, compassion and justice.

You and I are works in progress. This congregation is a work in progress.

Lent is the time to step back and take account of how we are off track.

Lent is the time for you and me to repent and, with God's help,

make something new and beautiful of our lives.

So repent and come to the Table.

Let God release the image of hope and new life imprinted in your soul. Amen.

ⁱ Garry Wills, Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 19-42.

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, "Repent," from Pulpit Resource, vol 32, No. 1, Year C, January – March 2004, 41.