

Last week, the Gospel Lesson described us as being the salt of the earth. There are different flavoring ingredients, some sweet, others salty; some subtle or bland, others spicy. Today's Scripture Lessons are the Tabasco sauce variety, peppered with confronting imagery. If we were to take its instructions literally, we would all be maimed ... missing limbs and eyes, experiencing the collateral damage of temptations of original sin common to us all.

We get angry with the failings of other people, the poor decisions they make, the selfish motives that victimize us. And yet, can we admit there are times we are our own worst enemy? There's an old admonition against pointing the finger of blame at another person, because there are three fingers pointing back at yourself.

Richard Shepard wrote in his book "In Enemy Waters" about two men he observed fighting in a parking lot where each had a car half-parked, one frontward, one backward, in a parking spot. The irrationality of it all was emphasized by a sign posted declaring: "No Parking." Neither should have been there, and they each likely had been carrying around internal anger just waiting to erupt.

All three Scripture Lessons today confront us with the importance of grappling with what's going on inside our hearts, minds and spirit, before we assess what choices we make in responding to external situations and relationships. Abraham, Paul and Jesus confront us with the challenge of taking charge of our inner lives in order to change our outer actions. It is a humbling experience of confession and responsibility.

Martin Luther King admonished his congregation "to avoid not only violence of deed but violence of spirit." We hear warnings about road rage, advising us not get entangled with others who may be out of control, driving like accidents waiting to happen. It may not seem fair, but better safe than sorry. We're not able to control the actions or attitudes of other people, but we have the responsibility to examine our own actions and attitudes

None of us like to be on the receiving end of abuse and anger. Children are often victims of adult frustrations. Two Fifth Graders offered advice based on their experience. Morgan said: "When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair." Leslie advised: "When your mother is mad and asks you, 'Do I look stupid?' it's best not to answer her." We know there can be much more severe examples of abuse, but these do highlight that none of us are immune to anger and its impact on our actions.

We make choices every day, what we wear, what we'll eat, who we'll talk to and what we'll say. For better or for worse, we'll have to live with the consequences of these

choices, as will others. There is hopefully a forgiveness factor, some tolerance and humor that we'll mutually demonstrate in accepting limitations of the situation and the mix of personalities. Yet there is an irreversibility and a point of intolerance whereby relationships reach the end of their rope. Unlike the computer keyboard, there is no "undo" or escape button to make the mistakes made go away. Are we able to reboot and start over, and is the loss permanent? Is the program corrupted? Will the entire system fail?

Personally, I yearn for messages of grace, the hope offered in forgiveness, the healing of humility and humor. Yet, I'm challenged to comprehend the love offered with discipline, to recognize the foundation of love beneath the guidance, and to understand the wisdom learned through painful experiences. Can I accept and trust God's Word when I feel judged, guilty, angry or hurt? Isn't that what it comes down to for each one of us?

It's hard to keep relationships going if we don't maintain them. Festering wounds may not heal, getting worse over time. When Jesus says that we should first reconcile ourselves with any brother or sister who has something against us before we approach God's altar, He's telling us to "nip it in the bud!" Don't neglect today's opportunities to convey love and forgiveness.

Philip Yancey wrote a book "What So Amazing about Grace?" He says that the word "resentment" literally means "to feel again." Resentment clings to the past, relives it over and over, and picks each fresh scab so that the wound never heals. Unresolved disputes require an individual who will break the cycle. It's a choice, to see things God's way instead of the petty politics. We need to get things right with God before we'll be in the right place in our relationships. Yet, Jesus says we need to get our relationships straightened out in order to reconcile with God. Somehow I'm reminded of the question: "Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?" I guess it's not an either/or scenario, but a both/and response. We aren't to neglect either perspective.

All of us have relationships that are hurting, encumbered with unresolved anger, guilt and worry. Perhaps these are what we need to bring to God's altar. Take care of what we can, confessing what we should, but return to worship to regain the healing of heavenly perspective.

Amen.