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Dear Friends,

By the third time the application failed to launch on my iPod, I knew I was in trouble. I pressed the icon, the welcome screen came up, then nothing happened for about ten seconds, and then the screen went back to the main menu. The first two times it failed, I of course tried what had not worked before, thinking that maybe this time it would magically turn out differently and all would be well. It did not; it was not.

To the App Store So I went to the App Store, tracked down the page for the dysfunctional program, and found a highlighted box that said “Support.” Two unsuccessful stabs with my forefinger later, I made contact and got to the FAQ page from the Developer. He began, “If the application fails to launch uninstall it and then simply download it again—you own the license, there will be no additional charge—and then initiate the reinstallation protocol. In most cases this will resolve any performance issues, dummy.” Well, the text did not actually say “dummy” at the end, but I could somehow hear it as the parting comment. Of course, all I had to do was a vigorous re-boot.

I obeyed and indeed after two minutes of video wheels spinning and a succession of silver lines advancing along thermometer-like scales, the program was reinstalled and working perfectly.

Basically, I had gone through Lent in about five minutes.

Life as non-performing software Lent begins with recognizing that there are things in our lives which do not work as they should, and our lives are not functioning as they were designed to. Probably our first response is to ignore the dysfunction or to hope it will simply go away or improve without significant input from us. We keep trying to launch the app which we already know will not perform.

When we finally admit that ignoring the problem does not work, Lent offers itself as a season especially suited for getting things fixed. In church the recovery strategy begins with consulting the one behind all of this—the Developer—for some input on how to get back on track. The Baptismal Covenant shorthand for this process is: “Will you persevere in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”

Here comes Lent, and with it...“Falling into sin” may sound dramatic, but it is basically a useful generic summary for the process which results when we, confident in our ability to know good and evil, wind up in one sort of mess or another. The way out, at least according to the Episcopal Church, is not to “spin” our failure and then try a clever new plan, but to repent—acknowledge failure—and return to the Lord to see where we went wrong.

In my software parable, the next step was removing the application that did not work. In church as part of the Absolution, we call this process “amendment of life.” In Lent, we remind ourselves that to have changed lives, we need to change how we live. Part of why we come to church (returning to the Lord) is to learn what we should turn from, and what we should turn to, and to seek the guidance and encouragement to make that change more palatable and more likely. My sense is that there are usually fairly plausible reasons for the dysfunction and destructive things we do, so effectively to address the behavior we seek to change, we need first identify and expose the fallacies of those underlying reasons, assumptions, and attitudes.

It is fine for the preacher to stand in the pulpit and denounce greed, but unless she also addresses first why we think material goods can and will offer us genuine security and happiness, and then shows compellingly how they fail to deliver on that false promise, our inevitably self-serving hearts are unlikely to change and, consequently, neither will our behavior. For better or worse, we do not trust preachers enough simply to accept what they proclaim: we want also to understand.

The limits of a consumer approach And on some level that dependence on understanding puts us into a weaker position. Because, for amendment of life to become a reasonable option for us, we need to see it as a promising and plausible alternative to what we currently do. Before we will give up what we have chosen and is already familiar, we need first to recognize that what we are doing now is not working in the short term or else will take us to a place we do not want to go further in the future. And then, secondly, we need to believe with enough confidence that the offered alternative will serve us better so that the prospect of future gain will outweigh the cost of lost current comfort or pleasure.

“Whenever you fall into sin” is more stark than, say, “if ever you think things might go a little better than they are now.” Naming choices, and the lives shaped by those choices, which deviate from the will of God sounds harsh. But, compared to the actual consequences of those choices, the words are fairly easy to address.

Now is not a good time When we are hit by the consequences of putting our faith in what will not stand up to the uncertainties of life (work, family, relationships, a sense of self based on what others think of us, and so on) may be when the evidence of our error is clearest, but it is also the time when our ability to process that evidence may be at its lowest point. When in shock from a great loss, being told that we set this up by trusting in something ephemeral is more likely to evoke in us rage than understanding. And, when the negative consequences of those choices have not yet materialized or seem remote and far-fetched, then to be told of the sinful nature of those choices might well feel somewhere between annoying and out of touch with real life.

So the challenge we all face in Lent—preachers and parishioners alike—is how to approach the issue of sin and its toxic, corrosive effect in our lives in a way which promotes actual healing and the formation of stronger lives. Too much heat and we generate rejection, too little and we do no good.

Two resources Perhaps a greater ownership of two related elements which are the antithesis of sin might, paradoxically, enable us to address it more honestly. The first is the reminder that after Lent comes Easter—after death—not instead of death, but after—comes Resurrection. Sin and death,

metaphorical and literal, often go together, and when we recall that Resurrection, not death, is the last word, then perhaps we can look at sin and death more dispassionately, seeing them not as objects of terror but as signs of disorder. The second element which might better equip us to confront sin in Lent is a deep engagement with the love and power of God, two things of which the Resurrection is a principle sign.

For if our identity, our sense of self and our sense of worth, depends entirely on our own merits, then we will probably never be able to be honest about our own sin, and consequently, it will always dominate us and our lives. A deep, real, existential conviction that we are individually known and loved by the Father Almighty (and Mother Almighty would work just as well) frees us to look at the flawed aspects of our nature more honestly because we recognize that they do not define our core identity.

Maybe we hear the Word of God as part of a crowd, but when we receive the bread and the wine, we each get it individually. At that point, the liturgy is not about somebody else; it is about you. And perhaps part of the meaning of each person being offered an individual piece of bread and a sip of wine from the common cup is to balance that sense of God coming to us each individually and to us collectively as a faithful community.

My sense is that that existential certainty of God's love for us each individually needs, in order to prosper, a regular renewal by hearing God's word and receiving God's sacraments in church each week. Without that regular rebuttal to everything we hear everywhere else in our lives about the source of our identity and the basis of our value—without that regular rebuttal, we inevitably will find ourselves thinking the way the world thinks and not thinking as God does. How we think—what we value, what we trust, what we experience as giving us strength—how we think will shape how we live and who we become.

We are what we eat How we think will be a function of what influences our thinking. The culture is constantly promoting its own values and assumptions; God called the Church into being to provide a structure and a voice for his opposing voice. Nothing is more important than deciding which voice we will trust, and then organizing our lives in accordance with that choice. The choice without the reorganization may be like repentance without amendment of life—a good intent with no staying power and no power to save. As Jesus puts it, What does it profit a person to gain the whole world but in the process lose their life (Matthew 16:26)?

The temptations to organize our lives around gaining the best of what we think the world has to offer are strong, clever, and ubiquitous. Join the congregation on the First Sunday in Lent, February 14, to hear more about temptations, how to see through them, and the resources we are given to deny them their hold over us. Or, do something else that Sunday morning, and ask yourself how that other activity stacks up, in terms of shaping your life and your identity, to what you might have acquired had you been in church. This Lent may you see coming to church not as a sacrifice, the loss of something better, or a grim duty, but as the chance to return to the Lord and enter into that true fullness of life which Jesus came to demonstrate and to offer.

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Rector