The 'Rub' In Spring Cleaning

THERE'S A RUMOR GOING around town. The word is out that spring is coming. How can one tell?

In fact, the first sign of spring is not the first robin. It's not a fresh smell in the air or the first bursting of green shoots above ground. Rather, the careful observer can detect the first signs of spring in people.

As February passes into March, one can begin to see a certain restlessness afoot, a stirring of body and soul. There's an uneasiness, an impatience with the doldrums of winter. At this time of year, the poet speaks of sap beginning to rise in the trees. With that rising sap comes new growth and new life.

The tree which has stood rigid and dormant through winter is now preparing for change--and so are we humans!

IF YOU ARE A PEOPLE WATCHER, as I am, you have probably begun to see the first signs of spring already. That "rising sap" restlessness, is now sending some people off to Florida. Others are devising plans for spring cleaning. Still others are exploring new hair styles, new clothing, new hobbies, new recipes, new furniture arrangements--almost anything different, to break out of the old winter ruts and routines.

Personal change and renewal will soon be throbbing all around us. Such change and renewal is the pulse of new life. It's good. It's healthy. It's a welcome breath of fresh air. But we should ask ourselves this question: Will these springtime changes really endure? Or will they pass away quickly--like the effervescence on a freshly poured glass of soda?

I ONCE KNEW A MAN who vowed to give up cigarettes every spring. His intentions were admirable. But as those intentions had no depth in his heart, he was always right
back to smoking just a month or two later.

It's not easy to give up smoking, but a person has almost no chance at all, if that decision is not firmly grounded in one's inner being.

I once knew an embattled young couple who went off to a fancy resort for a week, apart from their children, in order to bring new life to their relationship. The change of scenery was great. But when they came home, they quickly slipped back into the same old arguments, because their hearts were still the same.

Despite the change of surroundings, neither had moved even one step closer to forgiving the other for past hurts.

IF THE LIFE-STIRRING changes of spring are to endure and have value, they must be rooted in our hearts and souls. Otherwise, those changes, and their value in our lives will only vanish over time.

THROUGHOUT HIS MINISTRY, Jesus emphasized the difference: --between external change and internal change --between outer appearances and inner feelings --between a person's deeds and the spirit which motivates those deeds.

The fact is that much of Jesus' teaching was aimed at the human heart. As Jesus taught, the true renewal of life comes from the inside out. It requires a change of heart, to really change the whole person.

AS YOU KNOW, Jesus was deeply critical of certain Pharisees. Those Pharisees majored in external changes. They often acted as though sprucing up the exterior of one's life was all that really mattered.

Those particular Pharisees seemed to build their lives around dictums such as these, namely: --Be scrupulous in performing the correct religious customs. --Be seen in the appropriate places. --Make your life tidy and clean on the outside, where
others can see you and offer praise.

Yet, as Jesus said quite pointedly,

You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside also may become clean.

[Matthew 23:26]

OUR UNISON READING this morning from the Gospel According to Luke embellishes that teaching with dramatic detail. That passage presents the following parable which Jesus told. I’ll summarize that parable in modern language:

A man's home was rid of a demon. After the demon left, the man went around his house sweeping, picking up, and re-arranging his furniture in a neat, tidy order. One might even say that man was doing his spring cleaning.

In outer appearance, that man's home was now in "apple-pie order." It looked great. But here's the rub. That man did nothing to fill the vacancy in his home which was left by the evil spirit. Instead of filling that vacancy with spiritual things which were good, that man simply left his house empty.

Thus, the evil spirit felt free to return. And when it returned, it didn’t come alone. Instead, it brought seven more spirits of even greater evil with it. Very soon, that man's tidy home was in shambles, for now it was occupied by not one, but eight evil spirits.

As Jesus said, after that man tidied up his home, it was worse than before, because he had left his home empty.

AND SO IT OFTEN IS with us humans. In keeping with Spring, we can make all kinds of changes on the outer surface of our lives. However, if our inner spirits are just left empty and unchanged, we will hardly be much better off.

THE FACT IS that the risen Christ, calls each and every one of us to Christian discipleship. In effect, he calls each and
every one of us to be "born again." By that I don't mean just one, single, solitary lightning-strike experience of spiritual re-birth--such as the Apostle Paul had on the road to Damascus. Rather, what I mean is that Christ calls each of us to turn to him, day after day, so he can renew and refresh our lives, over and over again, through the years.

But that renewal and refreshment will hardly happen, or endure for very long, if we don't let it happen from inside our being, from our hearts.

Instead of just leaving our hearts empty and uninhabited, like the house in Jesus' parable, we are called by the risen Christ to invite him in repeatedly. He wants to live in our hearts.

THIS MORNING is the first Sunday in Lent. Today we set out on the pilgrimage of 7 weeks, which leads us through the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord.

As likely you know, the Christian Church's season of Lent is a period of forty days plus six Sundays. Those forty days are modeled after the forty days Jesus spent in the Judean wilderness, at the beginning of his ministry.

A view of that wilderness is on the front of your bulletin cover this morning. As you heard in our scripture reading this morning, those forty days in the wilderness were a very challenging time for Jesus.

For that was the time when Jesus looked within his own heart to determine his own personal values and what his earthly ministry would be like.

AS SCRIPTURE tells us, during those forty days Jesus was tempted to turn stones into bread, to feed his own hunger. In a symbolic sense, Jesus was tempted ignore spiritual needs and make physical needs the major focus of his ministry.

In fact, Jesus could have spent most of his ministry providing
for people’s physical needs and helping them get the material aspects of their lives in better order.

But as Jesus finally decided, he would focus much of his ministry on meeting people’s inner, spiritual needs.

After Jesus made that decision, he rejected that temptation with these words of scripture. As Jesus declared, NO: "One does not live by bread alone."

AS YOU KNOW, every year the season of Lent coincides with the coming of Spring.

In fact, the word "Lent" itself, has come to us from the season of Spring. For "Lent" is derived from the English word "lengthen," which described the increasing number of daylight hours which are experienced at this time of year.

AS I’VE OBSERVED: we humans grow restless as Spring draws closer. The sap rises, and we feel the urge to re-arrange the furniture of our lives. We feel the urge to get on with spring cleaning, new fashions, or new endeavors. Out with the old, and in with the new.

But when we make those external changes, let us also remember our spiritual lives. For instead of living with empty hearts, let each of us be sure we invite the risen Christ in.

And how does one do that? Here are some Lenten suggestions:

FIRST, read one of our New Testament Gospels from beginning to end. And, as you read it, make some notes for yourself, as thoughts, images, and stories from your own life occur to you.

In the course of your reading, ask yourself these questions.

--Who was this Jesus of Nazareth? And what does he mean to my life today?
--Ask yourself: Can I really believe that the risen Christ calls me today, and that he wants to renew and refresh my life, from the inside out?

--Also, as you look back over your life story, ask yourself when, and under what circumstances, you have felt Christ's presence in your life?

A SECOND suggestion: set aside some time each day in Lent, just to be with the risen Christ. If you wish, pick up a Lenten devotional book to help you focus your thoughts.

In the time you've set aside each day, pray in silent words, or simply dwell in the deep quiet of your heart, or seek the divine presence in nature's blowing winds or in the rapturous strains of an orchestra.

As you seek to encounter the presence of the risen Christ in those moments, think, if you wish, about a change in your life that you would like to share with Christ. Think also about what Christ's will could be for you, as you seek to make that change.

A THIRD suggestion: put your Christian faith into practice. During the Lenten season, make a point each day of doing something special for someone else. If you'd like some ideas on that, consider these Lenten thoughts which came from some church school children.

As a fifth grade girl said: "Call someone up. Give them cookies and milk at Lent."

As a first grade boy said: "Help mom clean the house."
[I assume that goes for "big kids" too.]

As a particularly creative third grade girl said: "During Lent, put on a play about Jesus. Set aside food for the homeless shelter. Read the Bible to other people."

I think those children certainly had the right spirit. In days gone by, Lent was always a time for giving something up. However, today's more positive trend is to do something
extra at Lent which helps others.

A FOURTH suggestion: as noted in your worship bulletin, on the
Sundays of March 11 and 25, I will be offering Bible study
sessions on the biblical accounts of Jesus resurrection.

Consider attending those sessions, to explore and get a better
understanding:
--of how the earliest Christians viewed the first Easter and
--of how Jesus’ resurrection is important to your life, to
your Christian faith, and to your sense of life after
death.

A FIFTH suggestion: during this Lenten and Holy Week period,
attend as many services of our church as you can. And, make
a special point of attending our church’s Maundy Thursday
evening service. That is an ancient and deeply
meaningful service which re-enacts Jesus’ Last Supper
in a liturgical way. Don’t miss it.

And, before you come to each worship service, take time to
prepare your heart to seek spiritual nourishment from the
service.

I believe there's some truth in the saying, that what a person
gets out of a worship service, has a lot to do with that
person puts into it personally. Be a real participant at
worship, and not just an aloof spectator.

YES, THERE’S A RUMOR going around town. Indeed, spring is
coming, and the sap is rising!

But take care this year to avoid the "rub" in spring cleaning.
Explore new hair styles, new clothing, new furniture
arrangements. But also don't forget, to invite the risen
Christ into your heart.