

Last Sunday I saw a story in The Seattle Times entitled, “Mental health problems of U.S. youth on the rise.” A study by Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, found that between 2008 and 2017 there was a greater increase in emotional distress and propensity to self-harm among young people aged 14 – to 27 than in any other time in American history. Over 13 percent had an episode of major depression in the past year – a 62% increase in nine years. Suicides for those between 18 and 25 grew 56% and those entertaining suicidal thoughts rose 68%. Suicide attempts increased by 87% for 20-21 year-olds and 108% for 22-23 year-olds. The study also found the emotional wellbeing being of those in this age range was poor compared to their elders. In 2017 18-year-olds were 50% more likely than 18-year-olds in 2008 to be feeling serious psychological distress.

Clearly, something’s not right. Twenge suggests two causes, ubiquitous communication devices and (the often related) lack of sleep. She says this increase in mental health problems comes amid the rapid

rise of smartphones and social media use among the young. When I point out these facts, I run the danger of coming across as the cranky curmudgeon raging against modernity. But, really, given what we know about smartphones' impact, why are they even legal for anyone under the age of 18? The answer: because in just the 12 years since they were introduced, we can't imagine life without them. Everyone has them. I think homeless people have smart-phones. And billions of dollars are made through them each year. We're seemingly stuck. Whether we love our smart-phones or secretly hate them, we're trapped in this web of interconnected functions we can't imagine escape— without a whole lot of effort. Which brings me to the topic for my homily (which isn't actually smart-phones).

“For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. [So] cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?” Jesus is calling upon us to change our lives – repent and produce fruit. The first time we heard this in Luke's gospel was in 3:8-14 when John

the Baptist said the same thing – “Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance,” when he spoke to the crowds coming to the Jordan to be baptized. Remember what we heard Ash Wednesday as the ashes went on our foreheads? “Repent and believe in the Gospel.”

I want to use the harmful effects of smartphones and social media on young people as an analogy for the larger challenge of flourishing, bearing fruit, as a Catholic in today’s society. If a person wants to escape the impact of smartphones and social media there’s a high cost. So much of what we do, and how we communicate, goes through those phones, that it’s a real sacrifice to give them up – even when we know that using those technologies harms us in the long run. When a person confesses to me that he’s addicted to pornography, one of the things I advise is that he give up his smartphone. Defeating an addiction requires radical measures, including restricting all access. But almost none of them can do this. It seems too hard and strange – the cost of conversion is too high.

Similarly, it's just as costly to try to live as, or even remain, a Catholic Christian today. It takes a real conversion. This is one reason the number of the faithful is shrinking. The whole society today is now organized around interconnected principles and assumptions that are profoundly contrary to the Gospel, but it's as hard to avoid their effects as it is to avoid using smartphones.

My main point today: following Jesus is increasingly going to cost us – but we must pay the price anyway. Discipleship is hard and requires big changes in our lives, probably bigger than we've imagined, bigger than our parents had to make. Don't down-play these difficulties. It's not just smartphones and social media. Our entire culture and society are hurting many of us adults, not just kids. Our politics, education, entertainment, technology, all have elements that tend to subtly undermine our relationships with God, and with one another. And even if we recognize that it's all getting unhealthy, we

have a hard time breaking from the web of these mutually reinforcing habits, compulsions and assumptions.

But Jesus reminds us today that, while the Father is patient and merciful, there is a time limit. The greatest tragedy in life is not to repent and change our lives while we can. Time can run out on us – through violence (think of Pilate and the 18 Galileans), accidents (think of the tower at Siloam), or due to our own procrastination. Eventually the unfruitful tree is cut down.

Lent is a reminder of the need for this difficult conversion of our life. Living for Jesus today is as hard as using a flip phone. It's just as inconvenient, disdained, incomprehensible . . . liberating, calming. The life of Catholics who want to remain Catholic in our society can no longer be a typical life – although it's still the most beautiful life.

Are you like the young people in Twenge's article? Do you ever admit, at least to yourself, that something's gone wrong, this isn't working for you – not just the technology, but the whole system? What

painful, difficult changes do you need to make in your life (with God's grace) to let Jesus in more, and make it spiritually healthy and a place of peace? Whatever they are, begin the change now, this Lent.