

Sermon Sunday February 26th 2023
First Sunday in Lent
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Today is the first day of Lent – the forty days prior to Easter during which Christians in some traditions (particularly Catholics and Anglicans) prepare for Easter through charitable giving, or by choosing to give up specific pleasures (such as sweets, alcohol, or some aspects of social media) as a way to foster simplicity and self-control. The aim of relinquishing these things is that cravings or desires for these items will serve as a reminder to pray and to refocus on spiritual matters. Yesterday I spoke with an Anglican priest who had, one year, decided to give up her practice of doing the daily Sudoku and Code-Cracker puzzles in the newspaper – so that her midday prayer time wasn't squeezed out by her absorption in those things. (There is nothing wrong with those practices in themselves!) Historically, the season of Lent hasn't received as much focus in the Presbyterian tradition, though many Presbyterian churches, including ours, are picking up on some of these spiritual practices.

Regardless of the specific practices we might or might not observe, in this season of the church year all Christians are invited *both* to reflect soberly on sin – on our need of God's help as we struggle with temptation and face up to the poor choices we are prone to make – *and* to rejoice in God's grace extended to us through Jesus Christ. That's what today's lectionary readings – readings read throughout the world on this Sunday – encourage us to do today.

As we begin to reflect on those things I would like to read a prayer of confession, which comes from the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship.

A Prayer of Confession - Book of Common Worship, p. 54. © 1993, Westminster/John Knox Press

Eternal God, our judge and redeemer,
we confess that we have tried to hide from you,
for we have done wrong.
We have lived for ourselves
and apart from you.
We have turned from our neighbours
and refused to bear the burdens of others.
We have ignored the pain of the world
and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed.

In your great mercy, forgive our sins
and free us from selfishness,
that we may choose your will
and obey your commandments;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.

It is not always easy for us to pray prayers such as that one. It can be hard for us to admit when something is amiss in our lives, or to acknowledge that we have not been as “good” as we believe we could be (like George, the dog!). The word “sin” itself can be one we struggle with and resist – even in prayer. As the Presbyterian prayer I have just read acknowledges, a sense of our sinfulness can make us want to hide from God, as Adam and Eve attempted to do, rather than turning towards God confessing our need of help.

Today I would like to talk about sin, hopefully in a way which leads us all to rejoice with the apostle Paul in the free gift of God’s grace – the judgement of “Not Guilty!” proclaimed in Romans 5. And I would like to ask: How might we open ourselves up more fully to God during Lent? What might we want to allow God to work on, in us, during the coming weeks? These things will differ for each of us, but today’s readings give us a good basis on which to build.

When we think about **Genesis 3** we might think about “sin” in terms of what one writer I read this week called “**God’s gracious boundaries**”. God set boundaries for Adam and Eve which they ignored – with catastrophic consequences. Although God continued to provide for them, and to love them, events were set in motion that would one day require a cross. We could ponder some big theological questions about the cause and consequences of sin but what attracted my attention in the reading I have done to prepare for this service were some rather challenging personal questions which have direct application for us today – reading from “Upper Room Disciplines” author, (Methodist pastor, Columbus Ohio) David Griebner – Page 47. (This book lent to me by David Coster.)

“To Lent (he uses Lent as a verb) is to wrestle with where we have allowed appropriate boundaries to break down and inappropriate boundaries to creep in. Some of the areas to look at include work, sexuality, food, relationships, and emotions such as anger and resentment. Where are you loving outside God’s boundaries in any of these areas of life? Where in your life is anger a problem? What relationships have broken down? What commitment has become too hard to honour? To Lent is to think about God’s wise boundaries.”

Of course, when we do ask ourselves such questions we can become discouraged and/or defensive. When we are conscious of our boundary-breaking propensities we can feel very reluctant to pray. I am grateful that this sort of experience is described so beautifully in **Psalms 32**, which we read earlier. At first the Psalmist expresses resistance: “When I kept silence, by body wasted away through my groaning all day long.” Next comes an acceptance of truth, and honesty with God: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” Finally, the Psalmist experiences a new sense of home: “You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance.”

“Happy are those whose sins are forgiven, whose wrongs are pardoned!” (GNT)

How might we begin our Lenten journey, then? I would like to suggest that, like those who participate in the 12-step programme of Alcoholics Anonymous, a very good place to start is by acknowledging we have a problem. It is when we do this, and turn to God, acknowledging our need, that we can begin to experience God's forgiveness, grace and unconditional love. And then we continue to do that each day of Lent – and for the rest of our lives.

There's a lovely song by a Christian artist, Twila Paris, which begins, 'I am here to confess the same old thing; how can he still be listening?' – words that I can certainly identify with. I suspect we have all had the experience of asking God, or perhaps someone close to us, to forgive the same thing over and over again.

When it comes to this sort of experience, we might recognise that the behaviours we are sorry for may have deep roots. The "Upper Room Disciplines" devotional again poses some pertinent questions that reflect that fact ... **When we do and say things we regret, what if instead of simply asking God to forgive us, we asked God to reform our *desire or will to sin in that way*?** For example, if we have made a hurtful remark to someone we love, asking God to change that part of our personality or experience that produced those hurtful words.

I have the sense that this sort of prayer, which invites the Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out, is one which gladdens God, as well as helping us to walk without shame with him. And this leads us to a few thoughts about Paul's theology of sin and salvation, which we heard some of in Romans 5.

"Finding Love: An Appreciative Inquiry into Christian Talk about Sin and Salvation," by New Zealander Andrew Leslie Callander:

"If we think we can solve the sin problem by behaving better we either become guilt-ridden and miserable (if we think we fail), or smug and self-righteous (if we think we succeed). ... God cures the sin problem, not by focusing on our bad behaviour, but by establishing a new relationship with us. ... God cures the sin problem by radical and unconventional surgery – by putting the old person of sin to death in Jesus Christ and then raising us up with him to new life in new relationship with God!" (Pg31-2)

"The true knowledge of our condition, as this is disclosed to us in Jesus Christ, ought to be greeted with enormous relief and rejoicing. Christian talk about sin ought to be good news, not bad news. It ought to be talk of the malaise that afflicts us, our release from its bondage, and our acceptance by God, who has already defeated our sin in Jesus Christ – not talk of our condemnation and shame. ... The baffling malaise that has dogged our every step is actually real and has a name. But, most importantly, the condition has been recognized and addressed by God himself and so all our futile attempts at self-diagnosis and self-medication can finally be dispensed with – Hallelujah!" (33).

"Upper Room Disciplines" –

“I will never be able to explain how ‘the free gift of grace of the one man, Jesus Christ’ took away our sin and opened up a path ‘that leads to justification and life for all.’ But I don’t think God asks me to understand it fully. I believe God invites me simply to accept that this is what God knew needed to happen so that we could be forgiven and reconciled.”

A prayer (from the Anglican priest who gave up Sudoku one Lent) ...

God of majesty, Trinity of Love,
Accept and make holy all that we are,
all that we have, and all that we offer you.
Keep us firm in our faith, and strong in your service.
Create in us a new heart, that we may respond willingly
to your transforming grace and power.
One God, our Saviour, now and for ever..
Amen.