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St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Lent 1, 2019

Here's today's sermon message: Take your sin seriously, for in ignoring sin you risk losing your soul's contentment to substitutes which will leave you wanting.

I love the Church's liturgical cycles, the seasons which call us to celebrate God's work in the universe and in history. The Church's calendar has dual seasonal cycles determined by both the solar and lunar calendar, it has a host of saint's days, Holy Days, Days of Feasting and two days a year when we are called on as a Church to fast, those being Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. The seasons of the year, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Pentecost have their own distinct traditions and purpose.

Today is Lent 1 and we have moved from the solar calendar to the lunar calendar. Lent lasts 40 days, and I have a prize for anyone who can tell how you get to "40 days," how the Church counts time in Lent.

Ok, I know that you are checking out on me, but I just want to drive home to you that the Church really takes time seriously and seeks to use time as a primary tool in building our spiritual life.

So, let's talk Lent and why it just may be the perfect season for your soul. Lent is a season of penitence, a time to take our sinfulness very seriously. We use a lot of senses to do this. We wear purple, the Church's color for repentance. We employ silence to quiet our senses in worship that we might better focus on our absolute need to cleave to God alone. We never say the word "Alleluia" in Lent. We invite our members to partake in the single most underutilized sacrament—confession, or for a loftier title, the Reconciliation of a Penitent. I prefer the Orthodox name for confession, The Sacrament of Second Baptism. The idea being that we are reborn by the tears which flow when we confess our brokenness before God and his agent, a priest. To learn how to make a confession, turn to the cleanest, most untouched pages of your Prayer Book, and bingo, you'll land on page 447. It's in the section called Pastoral Offices, right after marriage and thanksgiving for the birth of a child which I find most appropriate.

Every Friday morning I am reminded of my own priesting. At 6:45am the garbage trucks roll by collecting the refuse Lynn and I have collected and then discarded. At my ordination in 1984 I was told by the preacher to be a garbage collector for the souls in my care. It is a priest's sacred charge to help parishioners and others get rid of the waste, the dross, the broken pieces of life which we call sin in order that we might be prepared to celebrate with confidence and joy the truth of the resurrected life we share with Christ.

I get it that you are squeamish hearing about sin, especially when there is a finger pointing your direction. I am no puritan, but I know the detrimental effect and stain of sin. And make no bones about it, Lent is about sin, my sin, your sin, our society's sin.

Today's Gospel is about Satan tempting Jesus to sin. This story is archetypal. I wouldn't read it as you would a news report, it is a story intended to show that Jesus, too, had temptations which needed to be mastered in order for him to fulfill his purpose. This is such a powerful story. In fact, it is the earliest story of my childhood memory thanks to the artwork in The Children's Bible. When I was a little boy, we drove up the local mountain to be in the snow. I remember the vista turnout where we stopped and gazed upon the valley below. I was certain that this was the very place that Jesus was tempted to gain worldly power if he would only worship Satan.

For folks who are stuck by a story about Jesus and the devil, know this: Christianity is not a dualist religion with two equal powers duking it out in a fight for our souls. No, the term Satan is a technical term. It means “The Accuser.” Ha Satan, “The Satan” is within Judaism the term for the District Attorney. Every prosecuting attorney in Israel today is called Ha Satan, “The Accuser.” So, let the lawyer jokes abound, and for those who grew up in the Catholic or Evangelical Church, you might want to consider remapping your theology. Jesus was tested, but in the end, he relied on his faith informed by prayer and Scripture and did not succumb. Had he not resisted, he would have sinned.

What is sin? It’s actually a simple concept. It means “to miss the mark.” Here is my bow and arrow. The target represents God’s will for me. When I hit the mark, I am free of sin, but if I miss the mark, I have sinned. When we sin, we need to repent, in the greek, we need metanoia, translated “to change direction.” Seems easy enough, right? With practice, especially if I stay close to God, I will hit the mark every time. But here is the problem, as soon as you take your eye off the target, phantom targets appear urging you to hit them, to spend your life energy focused on the wrong target. If you are not careful, you will not even realize that you are aiming at a phantom target, mistaking your unbridled impulses for God’s will. Hitting the wrong target is missing God’s target for your life, it is sin.

Maybe you are angry from unhealed hurts and the target of revenge or vengeance calls out to you. Maybe you are untrusting in God’s providence and spend your life drawn to the target of making money. Maybe your personal relationships are out of balance and you disparately seek affirmation from others, another target. I struggle with a 35 year addiction to cigars. Those addicted to anything, tobacco, alcohol, sex know how much the target of addiction demands their attention, claiming priority over God’s will for us. And while it is no longer vogue to call addictive behavior as sin, in my life, I recognize it as such. Remember, I am a garbage collector and I know trash when I see it.

Look, I have always snarked that I can resist **anything**...except temptation. Stated differently, I am a sinner and I live in a sin-filled society and country. We humans are prone to two terrible extremes—**the first is deny the truth that we are sinners**, we are often prone to excuse ourselves without the slightest remorse or commitment to atone for our actions. **The second extreme is those who refuse to take out their trash**, those who will not let go of their sins. Some are too proud, others don’t believe that they are worthy of forgiveness. To the proud, I say, humble yourself before God when you approach the altar. To those who don’t believe that they are worthy of wholeness, I say that there is a balm in Gilead to make the sin-sick whole. God loves you and yearns for you to trust in His goodness, to believe that you are made in the image of God, perfect in His sight.

So, here we are at the beginning of this 40 day season marked by repentance and in hope that we are not defined by the times we have missed the mark.

If anything I have shared with you resonates, I invite you to the observance of a Holy Lent. Listen to God. Ignore the phantom targets begging for your attention. And should you come to discern that you, like me, are plagued by sin, by missing the mark, I invite you call on your parish priest and schedule a time for getting rid of your trash. I promise you that the Second Baptism of Tears is a precious gift that can help you to a holier life. Set aside your pride, the deadliest of sins, and humble yourself that you might better know joy and experience the abundant life to which you are called. If you want to transform yourself and this congregation, take stock and confess your sins.

How could I possibly not love Lent? It’s the perfect season for my soul. And it just might be perfect for your soul and the parish of St. Barnabas.