

## **SERMON, FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT**

### **“Lent, The Season of Sin”**

It is the first Sunday of Lent, a season to prepare for Easter. A time to focus on sin and repentance. Yes, Lent is sin season. Time for us to be honest about sin, to admit we are sinners.

One of the things most of us have trouble swallowing about Christianity is the idea that normal, nice, good people like ourselves are sinners. That we are born sinful and can't elude sin by being moral or good or religious.

It is much gentler and kinder to think that we are created in God's image, therefore we are basically good, our intuitions basically correct, our motives basically pure.

But then Lent, the season of sin, reminds us of the hard facts of sin. Is there any explanation other than sin for greed, genocide, abuse, oppression, lies, tyranny, hatred, jealousy, violence, murder, enslavement in our world? Even

the mundane selfishness,  
impatience, arrogance and  
resentment in our own hearts?

So welcome to Lent, the season of  
sin. Time to come clean and  
confess. Time to try to do better,  
yes, but also time to go deeper and  
realize we are captive to sin and  
cannot free ourselves.

Sin is more than breaking certain  
rules like drinking too much or  
sleeping around. Or the big sins  
from the Ten Commandments:  
lying, murder, stealing, coveting  
(whatever that means.) For many,  
sin is an abstract religious idea that  
does not have any kind of felt  
reality or consequences.

Lent calls us to understand sin as  
something more fundamental than  
rule breaking, more subtle and  
more inclusive, more universal  
than the little naughty no-no's we  
think and do.

Sin is much more insidious. Sin is  
the way we casually manipulate  
people to get our way. It is a  
hidden need for approval. It is the  
part of us that cannot rejoice when

a friend has good fortune. When it hurts to say congratulations.

Most of us think of sin as a word that basically means indulgence or an enjoyable naughtiness. Instead, think of sin as the human propensity to mess things up. And not just passively, but our active inclination to break stuff. Broken moods, broken promises, broken relationships, we even break our own well-being.

Sin is actual, not theoretical. Let's get off the eternal treadmill of trying to be better and do better to get it all right. Let us slowly and continually learn to receive love, atonement, forgiveness and mercy.

We began today's worship service with a confession for the season of Lent. By confessing, we are saying, "God, I've got some things to admit. I've not loved you with my whole heart. I have not loved the people around me. I have broken stuff, including other people. I have even broken myself with my human propensity to mess things up. That's my state of

being, God. Please have mercy on me, sinner that I am.”

When we can make that kind of confession to God and to ourselves, when we can admit that we are sinful, our self-identification changes. I am no longer identified primarily as a father, a husband, a man, a pastor. I am not primarily a Democrat or a Republican or even a Christian. I am not so much an upstanding citizen or right or reasonable. Instead, again and again, I call myself a sinner. I am in need of redeeming and forgiveness.

Lutheran theologian Martin Marty (who taught at my seminary) wrote that we live in a culture where “everything is permitted and nothing is forgiven.” He meant that we tend to reject the idea of sin and judgement in favor of a “you do you” moral individualism. We try to convince ourselves that there are only personal preferences, no moral absolutes, no right and wrong. Yet, when someone violates our sense of justice or righteousness,

there is no way of forgiveness or restoration.

Lent encourages us to seek an understanding of individual sinfulness, as well as universal sinfulness. The Christian doctrine of sin is a very democratic doctrine. It has a leveling quality. It draws the line separating good and evil, not between political parties, classes or denominations, but instead, the line is drawn through every human heart.

Lent is the season of sin. But Lent, once it points out our sin, does not leave us simmering, stewing in guilt and shame. We are not just sinners; we are sinners who can ask for mercy, believe that we can receive mercy. Living this way makes forgiveness possible, which is the only thing that makes lasting peace possible.

Without a clear sense of right and wrong, we will end up endorsing injustice, cruelty and evil. But also, without an equally profound vision of grace, we will end up only with condemnation and an

endless self-righteous way of “us versus them.”

If we are sinners, then we have something in common with our enemies. We are both wayward and deeply in need of grace.

As I proclaimed to you at the conclusion of our confession at the beginning of this worship service, “God’s arms are always stretched open wide to welcome the wandering ones home. In Christ + your sins are forgiven. You have a place in God’s house forever. Amen.”