

Meadowbrook Congregational Church

“A Healthy Sense of Sin”

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Mark 1: 9-15

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’

12 And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. ¹³He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

There is a story of a young priest who was going to hear confessionals for the very first time. He went with his mentor and colleague, a seasoned veteran of many years in the priesthood. After a day of hearing confessions the veteran priest approached the young one with some sage, professional advice. He said, “You know, you did very well for your first time. You listened carefully to everyone who spoke. And you responded back to those making their confessions. But perhaps a word of caution is appropriate. When a person finishes their confession, you should try to say something different than what you said today. After hearing a confession you should probably say something other than ‘Wow!’”

On the first Sunday of Lent, the church that normally helps us to feel good about ourselves beckons us to honest acts of confession and repentance. Instead of hearing words of affirmation and support, we hear requests to be honest about our failures and shortcomings. We are all sinners, Lord! Have mercy upon us!

On one of this week’s *Jeopardy* programs, the Final Jeopardy segment featured a quote by author Ernest Hemingway. It went something like this: “What is moral is what you feel good after doing, and what is immoral is what you feel bad after doing.” Now perhaps morality is a bit more complex than that quote. It does seem to me that perhaps too much of our behavior is justified and motivated by our ability to “feel good about it.” In the wilderness that is life, we sometimes have trouble being honest about ourselves. We make excuses about our behavior. We deny the existence of temptations. We rationalize our choices. We develop subtle mechanisms of denial. Carl Jung once wrote, “the darker the shadows inside, the more polished the mask we must wear.”

I recall that in the late 90's, a psychologist in Los Angeles was offering a seminar for married people who were considering extramarital affairs. The purpose of the seminars was not to prevent the affairs from happening but to enhance them. You know, develop excuses that your partner can't check. Choose your extra-marital partner carefully. Enjoy your relationship without any guilt. If you don't feel guilty and it makes you feel good, it isn't a sin!

We may shake our heads in self-righteousness. But there are places in our own lives where the honest truth is hard to find. We offer explanations for our own behavior like, "Anyone else would have done that" or "I'm not hurting anyone else" or "Don't I have the right to be happy?"

Why talk about sin? Why confront our shortcomings and our weaknesses? These are unpleasant things to talk about. Yet on the first Sunday in Lent, we are taught that if we are honest about our sin, we can be brought back into a healthier relationship with God.

The Scripture lesson for this Sunday has Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. The theme of these temptations is an allurements for Jesus to do something other than what God has intended for him to do. In that wilderness, Jesus was forced to look at himself honestly before he could really begin his ministry. He had to at least confront the temptation of sin that surrounded him so he could be what God really wanted him to be.

A few years ago, when the *Wall Street Journal* had time and space to write about something other than financial crisis, there was an editorial about sin. It began, "When was the last time you had a good conversation about sin?" The editorial recounted the moral dilemmas of society and then commented, "Sin isn't something that many people, including most churches, have spent much time talking about or worrying about lately. It used to be that sin offered a frame of reference for personal behavior. When the frame was dismantled, guilt wasn't the only thing that fell away. We also lost the guideline of personal responsibility. Everyone was left on their own. It now appears that many wrecked people could use such a road map."

The article hit a note of truth for me. While we may not be comfortable talking about sin, the editorial suggests that there is a certain value in the attitudes and behaviors toward sin that have come to be associated with the Lenten season.

Honesty. A sincere and honest confession of one's sin is a healthy thing. It seems that a candid look at who we are, including an accurate appraisal of the temptations that surround us, is the best way to determine if we are being the person who God wants us to be. If we can be honest about ourselves for forty days, we just might carry it on to the rest of our life.

Repentance. A turning around of one's life. A desire to live and be different than who we are right now. Through the story of a prodigal son Jesus teaches us the value of re-establishing a relationship with God and of God's welcome for us when we return to the place where God wants us to be.

Forgiveness. We are forgiven. It is good to know that no matter how far we have strayed, we are welcome in God's love. We don't need to prove our innocence. We don't need, as Jung said, to polish the mask. God always sees the shadows we attempt to hide. But because God loves us more than we can understand, God is willing to come to seek us again and again.

Hemingway wrote some other words, a story about the popularity of the Spanish name "Paco." His story proved another point. A father had journeyed to Madrid to put an ad in the local paper. The ad read, "PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON WEDNESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA." The next day the city authorities had to muster a squadron of soldiers to disperse a crowd of 800 young men named Paco, men who massed the street in front of the Hotel Montana, men finally being honest, men repenting the error of their way and men trusting in the forgiveness of their father.

So we are called to stand before God this Lenten season, honestly admitting what we have done wrong and where we have fallen short, proclaiming our desire to be more of who God wants us to be, trusting in the promise that is the forgiveness of God's grace. Through the mercy of God, this is a healthy thing to do.