

Repent, Reconcile, Grow
Fifth Sunday of Lent, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Hide your face from my sins/ and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God,*/ and renew a right spirit within me. Amen.*

Good morning. Congratulations, everyone; you've made it through 28 days of Lent: well over halfway there! I don't know about you, but it has seemed like a *long* 28 days to me. Perhaps that's because midwestern "Old Man Winter" never seems to leave. Or for others, maybe giving up your favorite TV Show, social network, or candy bar for 28 days in a row is beginning to get a bit difficult, in which case I'd like to remind you that Sundays don't technically count in the 40 days of Lent and I won't tell if you won't...

All kidding aside, Lent *does* seem to last a very long time, at least to me. Other seasons like Christmas and Easter always seem to zip by in contrast: perhaps because I have such positive feelings associated with them: hope, gratitude, joy. But when we come to Lent, the atmosphere often seems gloomier. A season devoted to reflecting on and confessing our sins more than normal is bound to take some sort of toll on us.

And, we do pay more of our attention to our sins during Lent. We began the season on Ash Wednesday. On the first Sunday of Lent, we prayed the Great Litany. We even begin each Sunday morning with the General Confession. We literally frame this entire season around our sin and repentance of it. Even our Psalm passage for this morning explicitly says the word "sin" six times and refers to it in six other ways as well. Sin is everywhere.

About three years ago, I was teaching a group of seventh and eight-grade confirmation students all about sin. When I asked the group to close their eyes and raise their hands if they thought they had sinned over the last week, zero hands went up. It was at this point I had figured I was in one of two possible scenarios. Either: (a) I was teaching an entire class of perfect, Christ-like teenagers, or (b) they didn't know what sin was.

After a few group attempts at defining sin, one young man piped up and said, "Sin is when we break one of God's commandments." The group seemed to like that definition—me included—but when we established that definition, one young lady said, "And that's why it's so easy not to sin: all you have to do is follow ten easy rules." I wish avoiding sin was so easy...

The students were all surprised to learn that there were much more than 10 commandments. When they began guessing how many there were, I got guesses like 50, then 100, then 200: their eyes widening further and further after every time I told them, "higher." When I finally broke the news that there are 613 commandments laid out in the Old Testament, that same young lady said, "I think I've probably sinned before..." They were beginning to see just how easy it really is to sin, and I gave her an honest response, "You've definitely sinned before."

As I told that class, and every confirmation class I've taught since, there's bad news and good news when it comes to sin. But, since the story ends with the good news, let's begin with the bad.

The bad news is that it is incredibly easy to sin. If we used that young man's definition, we can point to over six hundred different ways we can possibly sin. However, the Episcopal Church's definition of sin goes a bit further. In our Catechism (a document in our prayer book that states what we believe) we define sin as, "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God..." That gives you well over six hundred possible ways to sin... more like six trillion. Whenever we try to do what we want to do instead of what God would want us to do—especially if we do it intentionally—we sin. This makes some of the most common things we're not proud of doing sinful. Walking by and ignoring an open hand asking for something to eat: that's a sin. Having that extra helping of food when you know you've had enough—something I'm definitely guilty of: that's a sin. Even throwing away a piece of paper because the trash can is right next to you and the recycling bin is across the room: that's a sin. Some of these decisions we make are so small that we might not think of them as big or bad enough to impact anyone or anything, so we don't tend to think of them as sinful. But, the fact of the matter is that this really is how easy it is to sin. It is often the case whenever we try to make our lives easier, more comfortable, or more pleasant at the expense of another part of God's creation, we sin.

With so many possible ways to sin, it becomes easier to understand the mentality of the Psalmist: "For I know my transgressions, */ and my sin is ever before me." It's easier to understand how one might feel the guilt of their sins building and turning into such great fear of what the consequences might be that they run to God begging, "Cast me not away from your presence*/ and take not your Holy Spirit from me." There are so many opportunities for us to sin in our lives, and we often take them. More often than I like, I know I seek my own will rather than God's: that's the bad news. But, the story doesn't end here; as I promised, there's Good News too.

The Good News of the Gospel is that even when we—in our fragile brokenness—are unable to resist our own desires in favor of God's, Christ *is* able. Even when Jesus' "soul [was] troubled" in the days leading to his death—even when he could have easily sought his own self-preservation and ran for the hills—he submitted to God's will rather than his own. Christ offered this "reverent submission," as Paul puts it, because we often can't. And, in doing so, Christ fulfilled that last line of Jeremiah's prophecy from this morning's reading: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Because Christ draws all people to himself, God has forgiven our iniquities and remembers our sins no more.

The bad news is that we sin... a lot. The Good News: God forgives us and loves us anyway.

Now, this comes with a disclaimer. This doesn't mean that we can go around sinning left and right, up and down, and not expect any consequences. God does indeed forgive our sins, but that's not to say that we don't bear any responsibility for our sins and don't need to do anything about it when we do sin. The Catechism goes on to say that when we do seek our own will rather than God's, we "[distort] our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation."

God, friends, neighbors: they may forgive me for something I do wrong, but that neither erases what I've done nor makes things right. This is where repentance comes in.

Think of it in terms of a friendship. If I say something nasty about my best friend behind their back, it hurts: it doesn't feel good. Even if they outright forgive me because they value our friendship more than the hurt I've caused, if I haven't apologized and tried to make amends, the hurt is still very much there, and the relationship is still distorted. But, if I take note of how I have hurt them, offer a sincere apology, and make a sincere effort to stop saying nasty things about them, our relationship can begin to heal and even grow stronger than it was before.

When we sin—not if, but when—God will forgive us, but that doesn't heal the relationship. In order for true reconciliation to happen, we need to play our part and confess/admit/name our sins, and we apologize while promising to try and not do whatever we did again. When that happens, Christ's sacrifice, God's forgiveness, and our repentance all work together to bring true reconciliation. Our relationships with God, our neighbors, and all creation can begin to heal and grow stronger. Through repentance, we sacrifice our own will: we allow the grain of wheat that is *our* will for our lives to die, which allows the fruit that is *God's* will to bloom and thrive.

As we continue to move through this long season of Lent and continue to reflect on our sins, may we enter reverent submission and seek God's will rather than our own, but when we fail and do seek our own will, may we be able and willing to repent, reconcile, and grow. Amen.