

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Sermon: "Warning, Truth Told Here"

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WARNING, TRUTH TOLD HERE

Each week as I prepare the sermon one of my first tasks is to think of a sermon title that expresses the essence of the message. This week I chose, "Warning, Truth Told Here." Actually I thought it might be fun to create a makeshift sign and put it on the doors that lead to the sanctuary, but I chickened out on that one.

We all say that we want to hear the truth, but not really. Truth, God's truth, truth with a capital "T" is always hard to hear. There is always some aspect of the gospel that is bad news before it is good news. There is always some part of the biblical message that convicts us of what we're done or what we've failed to do.

The Bible tells us the hard truth that "all have sinned" and "fall short of God's glory." (Romans 3:23) Our shortcomings are myriad. We sin as individuals, and we sin as a group. We are part of a system that exploits the world for our own benefit.

We have (as one of our prayers of confession from the Book of Common Worship puts it) "ignored the pain of the world, and passed by the poor, the hungry and the oppressed."

Who wants to hear a truth like that? We want people to tell us that we're the "greatest country on the face of the earth," and that the people who attend our church are just the nicest, sweetest people you will even meet."

I'm sorry, but that's not what the Bible tells us.

I like the way the theologians of the Reformation talked about our sin. The phrase they used was "total depravity." Now there's a phrase with very little wiggle room!

LENT AT THE GROCERY STORE

This insight is so essential to the Christian message that the church developed a special season in the church year to help us reflect upon it. We call that somber truth-telling season, Lent, and today is the first Sunday in Lent.

A minister friend tells me that she was buying some things at the grocery store this past Wednesday. The clerk was giving the bag boy a hard time because he had decided to give up eating meat on Wednesdays during Lent. She said, "I've eaten meat on Wednesdays all my life, and it hasn't harmed me." She then tried to have my friend join in the teasing.

The cashier didn't know she was dealing with a minister and was about to get a mini-sermon!

My friend said,

"The reason we give up things for Lent is not because we think it will keep the boogey man away. It is because that small sacrifice helps us remember and appreciate the big sacrifice God made for us when He sent His Son to die for our sins on the cross of Calvary."

The hustle and bustle of the checkout line became strangely silent as she gave her brief testimony. Finally, the bag boy said, "Yeah, that's why I do it, what she said!"

ASH WEDNESDAY

In a world that believes we can do anything we want to do, we Christians have the audacity to throw in a season like Lent. We freely use words that everyone else wants to avoid, words like sacrifice, sin and death.

In a world that is desperately trying to deny mortality, we, on Ash Wednesday embrace it as the message of the day. You may have seen some people who attended an early Ash Wednesday service this past week. They were the ones with those black smudges on their heads.

For those of you who may not be familiar with this service, in the Ash Wednesday service ashes are imposed on the worshipper's head as a reminder that our time on earth is brief indeed. A prayer from our Book of Common Worship goes,

"Almighty God, you have created us out of the dust of the earth. May these ashes be for us a sign of our mortality and penitence, and a reminder that only by your gracious gift are we given everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen."

Then, as the ashes are imposed upon the worshippers the worship leader says,

"Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

That's the truth of course.
But, what a hard truth to hear.

SPOILING OUR FUN?

And yet, if we don't hear that truth, if we don't live with the somber truth about sin and mortality, the alternative is a careless and thoughtless life. The alternative is a "me centered" life that is ultimately void of meaning.

And yet that's what many people try so hard to achieve. So many ask, "Why can't we just do what we want? Isn't that the definition of freedom?"

Every year before Lent begins they hold a celebration of that kind of thinking in New Orleans. They call it Madis Gras, a tribute to hedonism and debauchery on Fat Tuesday before the more somber tone of Lent takes over life.

It's as if they are saying in this celebration, "All of life would be fun like this if only the stogy old church would quit spoiling our fun."

A preacher told of a ruckus that occurred when he was serving as pastor in a coastal South Carolina town. It seems that the local Episcopal

Church had decided to place three crosses on the lawn adjacent to their church.

These were not the nice smooth decorative crosses that we have mind you. These were accurate representations of the old rugged cross, and they draped them in purple for Lent.

After a few weeks the Chamber of Commerce called. They had a complaint about the crosses. They said,

"This is a big season for tourists. We think those crosses could send the wrong signal to visitors at the beach. People don't want to come down here for vacation and be confronted with unpleasantness."

But, the church stood its ground. The three crosses stayed despite the complaints. The church said, "It's Lent. People are supposed to be uncomfortable."

SWIMMING AGAINST THE STREAM

I have said many times that to be a Christian is to swim against the stream. Like the salmon that swim upstream to reach their spawning grounds so Christians insist on swimming against the tide of popular opinion and popular culture.

One commentator said that "these forty days from Ash Wednesday to Easter are among the most countercultural and subversive in the church year. Confession of sin, focus upon death, honesty about temptation, these matters do not come naturally to us.

We live in a success-worshipping, power-seeking, feel-good culture. Lent moves us in a different direction."

ADAM'S SIN AND OURS

So here's the truth once again, ready or not. We're not the nice people we pretend to be. According to Scripture, we are the children of Adam and Eve, the first man and the first woman.

It was through the sin of Adam and Eve that sin came into the world, and we, as their spiritual heirs follow in their footsteps. Their story is our story.

And through this original story about sin, we learn not only the hard truth about our sinful selves but we also gain an understanding of how God saves us from that sin.

Paul put this way in our lesson for today.
" ... sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned ... " Romans 5:12
(NRSV)

FORBIDDEN TO EAT FROM ANY TREE?

In the Garden of Eden, the tempter appears and asks the woman,

"Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden?"

In other words the tempter asks in effect,

"Is it really true that God withholds the blessings of this world from you?"

Saying it another way, "Girls and guys just want to have fun, but all God wants to do is stop our fun"

Notice how modern this sounds. Is this not what the world asks of us in their devotion to over the top celebrations of sin? The excesses of Madis Gras ask this question.

Las Vegas in their advertisements proclaim,
"What happens here stays here."

They too are asking the same question. They ask, "Why not do what you want to do? Sin is fun. God wants to spoil all your fun. Be rebellious. No one will ever find out."

FORBIDDEN TO EAT OF JUST ONE TREE

But, of course, the question is a deceptive one. It is based upon a false premise. God does not withhold the blessings of the world from us. Eve knew that. To her everlasting credit she replied to the tempter,

"There are many trees we can eat from. In fact there's just one we have to avoid. It's in the middle of the garden. He said if we eat of that tree, we will surely die."

Despite her desire to be faithful to God, the crafty serpent has Eve right where he wants her. Now Eve's mind is focused on the one thing that she can't have. And the stage is set for the ultimate temptation, the temptation to mistrust the goodness of God.

The serpent with a laugh responds to Eve by saying,

"Oh come on. You don't believe that, a bite of fruit from a forbidden tree? What a primitive idea!

The reason God doesn't want you to eat from that tree is that if you do, your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing both good and evil."

YOU ALWAYS WANT THE FRUIT THAT'S BAD

It is sometimes said that there are three ways to get something done. First, do it yourself. Second, hire someone to do it. Third, forbid your kids to do it.

God forbade his kids, Adam and Eve to do one thing, and of course, that is the very thing they wanted to do.

This, my friends is one of the most ancient stories in the world and yet it is just as modern as this morning's newspaper.

Why do people do the terrible things that they do? Why do we all sin? We want to be "like gods". We think that our way is the right way.

The very definition of sin describes what many modern men and woman believe, that they can decide for themselves what is right or wrong. If God forbids it, they want to try it!

In contrast to this ancient and modern philosophy, the Bible tells us that this is not freedom at all.

It is the very essence of sin and death.

NAKED

The Bible tells us that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit they "discovered" they were naked. In my opinion this can also be taken in a symbolic way. They saw themselves as they really were, and they saw their sinfulness before God. They learned to feel shame.

Now, contrary to popular belief, guilt and shame are not bad things. They are a means of grace. They are God's way of letting us know that something is wrong, that we are in dire need of fundamental change.

And in this moment of nakedness when we see ourselves as we really are in the sight of God, then we have come near to salvation. Then we are ready to hear the hard yet gracious truth, all of us are sinners, seemingly without hope.

REDEMPTION FROM THE FALL

But, Paul tells us that there is hope in the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Even though Adam and Eve's story is also our story, it is not the only story. Just as the fall of Adam brought sin and death to the whole world, so the life, death and resurrection of Christ brought salvation and life to the whole world.

(See Romans 5:15-19)

Another traditional text for the first Sunday in Lent is the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. You can look at that story as a kind of counter to the temptation story in Genesis. The temptations of Jesus in the wilderness all revolve around this same theme, mistrusting the goodness of God.

The devil tells him,

"If you are the Son of God, then turn stones into bread, jump off the pinnacle of the temple and so forth." The little word "if" is the seed of doubt and temptation.

But, Jesus is able to do what Adam (or human beings, as that's what the name Adam means) have been unable to do.

Jesus resists the temptation to mistrust God, and in that act of faith a whole new world is born.

Christ brings life to our death dealing ways. Christ offers forgiveness for our sin.

A NEW AFFECTION

There was a famous sermon preached in the 19th century by a man named Thomas Chalmers. The sermon was entitled, "The Expulsive Power of a New Affection." Fortunately the sermon was better than the title!

In that sermon, he talked about the fact that sometimes the dead leaves of a tree never fall to the ground all winter long but cling to the

branches. However, they are finally discarded in the spring when the new life of sap rising in the tree forces them out and replaces them with new leaves.

In the same way, the dead and sinful instincts of the human soul can only be replaced and overcome when something new and powerful and alive takes possession of that soul.

No person can deal effectively with his or her sins. The seeming progress becomes an occasion for new sins of pride and self-congratulation. It is not possible to pick the dead leaves off a tree!

Instead, the Spirit of Christ renews our minds and hearts and our lives. God in Christ causes a grace to rise within us and that rising grace helps us see what we could not see and change what we could not change before.

THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

Yes, we could put a sign over the door of our sanctuary, "WARNING, TRUTH TOLD HERE!" But, we could also put up a sign that says, "YOU WILL KNOW THE TRUTH AND THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE." (John 8:32) Jesus said that, and it's still true.

How can people like us tell the truth about ourselves?

We can tell the truth because we know the whole story, that though our sin is serious, in Christ "grace abounded". (Romans 5:15) Or as the old hymn puts it, "Though our sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

The reason we can tell the truth here is that we don't get what we deserve. The God who should by all rights have punished us for our failure to be people we were called to be has instead loved us.

And through the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ God has called us prodigal sons and daughters back home.

Have you been a prodigal son or daughter?
Have you rejected God's grace in order to do your own thing?

It's never too late to come back. As the hymn puts it, "Grace, grace marvelous grace, grace that is greater than all our sins."

The grace of God in Jesus Christ is greater than all our sins. May God help us embrace that grace.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN