

Sermon March 19 2023, Lent 4

We are in Lent, “a period of fasting and regret for one's sins that is observed on the 40 weekdays from Ash Wednesday to Easter by many churches”. This sermon, I thought, was going to be about systemic issues and Lent. The story of Precious came hard at me, and needed to be said first.

Let me share a personal sin.

Early this month a Nigerian man, almost certainly an illegal migrant, tried to sell Sharleen and me pocket Kleenex at the public market in Granada, Spain. Public toilets there don't always have toilet paper. Pocket Kleenex can be handy. We talked in English and at the end prayed together. His given name is Precious, a reminder that he was a baby welcomed with joy into his family, and, always, a fellow Child of God, a Child of Light.

I did not buy the Kleenex, and instead brought out a handful of small Euro coins to give him. No sin there. Now the BUT - the handful of small change, worth more than one Kleenex, included a 1 Euro coin that I might need for public transit. Probably not needed, capable of work-arounds with effort and time, but maybe needed. I pulled the 1 Euro coin out of the handful and put it back in my pocket. Precious' face spasmed slightly, and he said thank you as I passed him the handful. The 1 Euro coin stayed in my pocket.

It is almost certain that Sharleen and I will live out our lives with more money than we need. The 1 Euro coin, or 100 Euros, will not make Precious' life secure. It would help that day. Is there any doubt that I put my minor convenience above the basic necessities of Precious? Is there any doubt that I sinned? Nada. Zilch. Zero.

I can't go back in time, and really can't go back to Grenada to find Precious. I live with the regret. Precious is part of my Prayers of the People. He motivates me to do better with others.

May God protect Precious and keep him - his life is hard.

It is only after his story was written that I realized why it must come first - Precious teaches me:

- I figure things out really late, if at all - like the Disciples too; and
- without a clear sense of my own frailty, I am much more likely to be in the crowd saying "if you are the Son of God, come down from the Cross" than to be Simon of Cyrene, also carrying the Cross.
- Lent is first about my sins, not the sins of others.
- God somehow can make even these flawed pieces work.

May God help make my repentance real

I sense a darkening in the world. Despite wonderful advances in education, health, safety and other markers of well being in the last century, there is war in Africa, Europe, the mid-east and perhaps soon in Asia. More important, with echoes of the 1930's, authoritarian politicians promise tribal purity that always end in tragedy in this messy wonderful world. Think the Congo, the Ukraine, Myanmar, Jim Crow, ethnic cleansing, First Nations forced assimilation, polarizing other countries elections.

Also remember that politicians are people who tell us what we want to hear. Politicians are us, not them.

A book review of *Victory City*, the new novel by Salman Rushdie, ends with:

Victory City is of a desperate plea for shared humanity, especially in our darkest times. As the story's narrator puts it, "that in the end the salvation of human beings came from

other human beings and not from things, no matter how large and imposing – and even magical – those things might be.”

As a Christian, I put God into Salman Rushdie’s plea ‘*the salvation of human beings came from other human beings and not things*’. God is among us, and within each of us. The best of what we can give others and receive from others includes God.

What are Rushdie’s **things**? It includes bling - fancy jewelry/cars, huge houses, destination resort holidays. At a deeper level, perhaps **things** are more richly understood as idols - simple, certain objects of worship that replace the messy mysterious engagement with God around and within us.

Several years ago, a kindly priest that I admire said that we must be compassionate and patient with others, *unless it is a justice issue*. The difficulty is: what does not include a justice issue? Even our tea and coffee include justice issues. In tropical countries growing ethical coffee improves biodiversity, and the life of agricultural workers. Taking the bus not the car, what we pay our office administrator, how we heat our homes - everything includes an element of justice.

So the priest’s practical advice was to know ourselves as patient and compassionate, and to act like that — occasionally. Put this way, the priest would be horrified.

Some people grow intolerance and rage to give purpose to their lives, or even earn their living. Being patient with those impatient with us, trying to understand and engage with those who only want our obedience are versions in a minor key of **love those that hate you**. May God give me strength to oppose the apostles of rage, also the apostles of indifference. May God give me the wisdom to be different, even unto suffering and death — for that is what Jesus did. For me, that is the central story of Lent and Easter.

This week the Globe and Mail newspaper published an essay by the official in the Canadian security agencies who leaked information on the meddling in Canadian elections. Copies of the essay are at the entrance table.... as a citizen and a Christian, read it.

The unknown official, who faces criminal charges if discovered and would be fired, said:

On the question of what happens next for me, I have little to say but this: if and when the time comes, I will take my lumps for my part in this. I will do so without resentment or regret, knowing that while what I have done may be unlawful, I cannot say that it was wrong.

I say this because I was raised to believe that integrity is the act of weighing your actions against your principles, not against what is convenient or expedient. And here my principles remain firmly tied to those words in my oath: I will serve my country, I will serve the democratic institutions on which it is founded and I will most certainly serve my fellow Canadians.

What are the Christian principles that anchor your life? For which principles will you ‘*take my lumps ... without resentment or regret*’? Will you make those principles public and before God, like a marriage vow? If you need some time, ok. If you won’t do it, why?

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If we accept that every person is a Child of God, a Child of Light, then no one is our enemy. If we accept that every person is capable of sin, then anyone might lead us astray. Including us. Kindly clergy too.

One of the gifts of community is discomfort, and support for discomfort. Accept the discomfort, like the thorn in the flesh of Paul.

A sermon that on Monday was about systemic evil, and the church response, becomes something different by Sunday. No longer all about error and evil in others - it starts by acknowledging my own sin. With that rueful knowledge, here is my public vow: success is to keep reaching, keep humble, keep searching myself and the world, keep doing what little I can do.

May that be a Lenten gift to our family, community and the world.