

Reluctant Rebuke

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1st Sunday of Lent

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

“... The eyes of both were opened...”

We are a very critical, judging, damning people, and we're good at it. We are good at character assignation, at condemnation, criticizing and critiquing. The last political election was not about positive ideas and forward thinking, but instead about trashing the opponent. It is easy to criticize and condemn, because we get a chance to focus on somebody else, we get a chance to put someone else down, and we do not have to focus on ourselves. Maybe you aren't a critical person, maybe you are one of the kindest people around, but honestly, I'm not. I'm not proud of myself, but I tend to find many ways to see weaknesses, ways that things could be done better, and I tend to point out things that are not quite in line. I watch television from time to time, the reality shows, the court TV shows, the 6:00 news and find myself criticizing those I see. I look at the clothing, the food eaten, the style of speech, and find myself criticize and condemning. Do you find yourself in a similar position? Do you find yourself criticizing as well?

When I was studying at Oberlin I ran into students that had an issue for everything – they fought for the cows, they fought for the flies, and they fought for the crab grass. It got to the point that one couldn't say anything, wear anything, or do anything because someone somewhere was being oppressed, or one was just being insensitive. I felt like making a movie, “When Liberals Attack!” The hypercritical attitude of the student body in search of freedom for the least had gone so far that freedom for all was taken away. All were oppressors, and so all were to be condemned.

The great teacher and speaker Dale Carnegie once said, “Any fool can criticize, condemn, and complain – and most fools do.” How many preachers seem so ready to condemn, so ready to damn, and so ready to point out the evils of one group of people or another? We all find ourselves at one time or another like that sour puritan preacher, looking for any and all evils to condemn and criticize – easily and swiftly. We are a very critical, judging, damning people, and we are so very good at it.

At the same time, we are ourselves a fallen, damned and judged people. We seem to neglect ourselves somehow, and miss the fact that we are a fallen people, broken and damned just as much and the next person. We are standing in the mud, covered with mud, and often we are pointing out the mud on the person next to us. There have been times when I have let a number of choice words go in anger, there have times when I have failed to mention something because it would be easier not to say anything. Have you ever looked the other way when someone needs help, have you ever tried to justify your actions when you know deep down that you did not do the best thing? “I don't have the time, I don't have the resources, and I couldn't make a difference.” White lies, manipulation, envy, anger, lack of compassion, and selfishness all are on our plates, aren't they? We are all in a position to be criticized, condemned and judged, aren't we? We all have our own sins and faults. Have you seen the movie, *High Noon*, starring Gary Cooper? In that town, not one person was a righteous, holy person. Even the star, Gary Cooper, could be seen as a selfish individual because he stays in the town to meet his opponents, striving to hold to his pride and sense of “duty” over the concerns of his new wife. Each and

every person in that town turned away from Cooper, thought about them, and blamed someone else. And aren't we all like that? Aren't we all members of that town, in the human race?

Today the scripture comes from Genesis, and it is a story that we all have heard again and again. It is the story of who we are, and why we are the way we are. Did you know that the word for "naked" in this passage is the same as "crafty?" The serpent is crafty, and in the end, Adam and Eve become "crafty" themselves. They and we become the serpent, justifying, manipulating, and turning from God in our actions. We have all become damned, fallen people, and this story marks the beginning. The great Baptist scholar, Walter Rauschenbusch, argue that our fallen-ness has spread so that not only individuals, but also institutions are also fallen and prone to sin. Banks, businesses, schools, and even churches are marred, marked, and dirty. One only needs to look at how churches have advocated things like segregation, classism, racism, and genocide, to see the mud that is on our own doors. So we read the story of who we are today, of all of our nakedness, craftiness, and fallen-ness in the Genesis text. We read the universal story, one not written for just Israel, but for all humanity. Adam and Eve disobeying God is a story for all of us to own and claim. We criticize, we point, and we blame, but we are all human, we are all a part of this story. Oh, we all are a fallen, damned, and judged people. We all are standing in the mud together.

It is the way we live; it is our actions that condemn us. In our lives, we carve our own path to judgment. Through the way we live our lives we place ourselves into the wilderness, into the desert and out of paradise. Selfishness, desires, hubris, pride all feed on and come out of and become our fallen nature. We are all created good by God; we are all precious in the Lord's eyes, yet we all live in a way that turns from God. In the great story of the fall, *Paradise Lost* by, John Milton, Satan offers into Eve's ear the key to the sin. He whispers:

"Vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires, blown up with high conceits engendering pride." (Bk IV, 808-809)

Desires, hopes and aims by themselves do not condemn us, but acting upon them does. It is the turning away from God towards desire, towards our own hopes and for the sake of our own pride that leads us to sin. Adam and Eve desired the fruit, and justified their desire through a number of ways. Wisdom, taste, knowledge are all good things to have, so we must eat the fruit. The church desires the fruit of power and justifies this desire in a number of ways. We need more people to survive. We need more money to keep our building maintained. But seldom do we hear that we need the people, and the money to spread the Gospel and serve humanity on behalf of Christ. Rather, the criticism and rebukes of the world are voiced in the call for funding of a new building, ministry and program. The power of the church will grow so we can crush the world with righteousness, with might, and with pride. Churches become like the ship's captain Ahab, hunting the white whale of pride rather than the servant calling of Christ.

We all become like Ahab one time or another in our lives when we strive after our own desires, concerns and aims. This is what Augustan described as sin, a turning from God towards our own wants and desires. In Dante's great work, *The Divine Comedy*, the damned are those who have completely turned from God and have chosen to embrace their desires for greed, sloth, and so on. God didn't put them in hell; they put themselves in hell.

We are all a people who are sinful, will be sinful, or have been sinful. Again and again the serpent approaches us, we realize that we can be crafty, and we choose that which is not the will of God. From the simple decision of what kind of car to purchase (a Toyota, Honda, or Jaguar) to the larger decisions of helping our neighbors, loving our enemies, and caring for the least in our society, we again and again individually and as a people turn from God and chose our own path. I do it, I am a sinner and I imagine that many of you are as well. It is the story of humanity, it is the way we live, our actions, and our very lives condemn us.

So we are all in the mud together, we have all fallen short of the glory of God. Churches as well are in the mud, and have fallen short of the glory of God. So how can we be so bold as to criticize, condemn, and rebuke? How can we be so audacious as to point our finger at others and

declare “sinner?” Did we somehow find an exemption from the Adam and Eve story? Did we somehow find a different story to claim as our own? Remember with each finger pointed, there are three pointed back, so we must be reluctant with our rebukes and our criticisms. We must hesitate with our condemning and damning, and instead encourage repenting and lamenting. Let’s own this story and weep because we are crafty, we are naked, and we are shamed in the eyes of God. Let’s own this story and cry for mercy because the glory of God’s creation is lost every time we turn from God to our own desires. The great preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, once wrote,

“How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they otherwise be.”

So as a community gathered together, on this first Sunday of Lent, let us cry, let us put on our sackcloth, and let us repent because we are a fallen, broken people who have sinned. Let us use the example of David repenting of his heinous acts of adultery and murder. Do you know this story? David lusted after Bathsheba, had an affair with her, and then had her husband killed. He thought he was going to get away with it, until Nathan the prophet confronted him. Nathan confronted David, spoke the truth to David, left David standing naked because of his crafty deeds, and all David could say was, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

This is all we are to do, this is where we are to start, to claim that we have all fallen short, to turn to our neighbors, to our friends, and even our advisors and say, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Embrace, weep and mourn who we are, what we have done, and allow yourself to be fully revealed before God. Now we are all in the desert, in the wilderness alone, naked, and before the Lord. Now we are ready to face our Lord as the people we truly are. All of us, each one of us has done something, have lived in a way that is contrary to the will and nature of God.

But I will not leave you here. It takes many, many years, many, many pages, but there is hope. Today, Christ enters into the desert to be with us, and show us the way out. Today Christ offers us hope and salvation as he joins us in the desert. Here in the desert, Jesus confronts the serpent, our crafty nature, and says, “no.” Here is a man who breaks the cycle, who steps out of the spiral and offers hope. This is the hope of Lent that Lent begins in the desert, but ends in paradise. We only have to follow the way before us that Christ calls us to walk.

So Christ comes into the desert, and shows us the way out. He says no to the desires, the temptations, and the pride that the serpent calls him to. And then he reaches out his hand; he reaches out to each one of us, and calls us to the same way, to the same response and to a new life. Will you take it? Will you respond to the hand of Christ and live in the way God desires? It is through our own actions that we fall, but the grace of Christ reaches to pull us out of the mud and into God’s favor. Walk with Christ, say “no” to the world with Christ, and say “yes” to the Lord!

There will be times that you fall, but Christ will pick you up. There will be times when you lag behind, but Christ will wait. There will be times when you find yourself right back here in the wilderness where you met Christ. But he will come and find you, and offer his hand to you again. This is the grace that Christ offers, an end to the story of Adam and Eve and a beginning of a new story of hope and redemption. Each day is a new one, each moment is a new one, and the grace of God through Christ calls us again and again to live in the way Christ sets before us. So on this first Sunday of Lent, are you willing to fall on your knees before our Lord, declare, “I have sinned before you, My God and My Lord,” and then take the hand of Christ. He calls you, and will lead you out of the wilderness of the world, into the heart of God through the cross. He calls you and will lead you to shed your crafty nature, and don the pure and holy baptismal robe of grace and forgiveness. Christ is here to help us, forgive us, and love us. Christ enters into the desert, and shows us the way out.

Then, as we embrace and are true about whom we are, we will be able to call others to join us. There are others out there who need the grace we experience. There are people out there

who are looking for the community, the prayer, and the love that we feel within this church. But we don't reach out because we are better, because we are pure, or because we are holy. We reach out because we understand, we share the experience, and we are a broken people. It is out of humility that we invite people to be a part of this community. It is a humble act that drives us to lead others to Christ's open hand. We stand in front of our building, welcoming others to join us with an apology and an embrace. "I'm sorry," we say, "we aren't the perfect, shining people that maybe you were expecting." "We are a people who are trying not to sin. We are a people who stumble, falter, and sometimes get it right. We are a people who have been called by Christ. This is messy, this is difficult, and it is blessed by God. Will you join us?" We evangelize by asking other to pray for us, by sharing our weaknesses, and admitting our humanity. We all have the same story, we all have the same beginnings, but we can choose a different ending. Turn from the criticism, and realize that God weeps for us all. Turn from the self-righteous social commentary and realize that we are all in the mud together. Turn from the world into Christ's arms here in the desert, and realize that Christ will show us the way. Will you walk with him, will you follow him, will you give your life to Christ and be cleaned?

AMEN