

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent: Romans 5:12-19

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Ash Wednesday remains one of the hardest days of the year. We spend so much time learning to be a community, handling conflict, welcoming new people. We spend all that time loving each other, and then we burn the memories of last year, and I smear the ashes on your foreheads and tell every one of you that you're gonna die. That's really hard to do. But what surprised me this year wasn't the ashes. It was the Litany of Penitence, that part of the service where we kneel for a bit too long and do a ramped up version of the Prayers of the People. That section's got over a dozen prayers acknowledging where we've fallen short of that whole Jesus thing. And one of 'em hit particularly hard: "Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty." That prayer starts with ending our blindness and indifference. Other prayers do something about it, but that one specifically gets at the importance just in seeing where suffering exists. We see it, and if we see it, presumably, we feel compelled to do something about it. Not being able to see suffering, assuming you're trying to look for it, not being able to see suffering may be 'cause we live in a system designed to hide suffering. That's a damning state of things, but it's not necessarily your fault. But if you do see suffering and you choose to do nothing, regardless of who is suffering, now that is your fault. That's turning your back on the man at Siloam. That's crossing to the other side of the road ahead of the Good Samaritan. That's staying silent before the cock crows.

We've seen this play out in our history before, at times easier to see than others. The Trail of Tears, the Three-fifths Compromise, Jim Crow, the reservation system, the internment of Japanese-Americans -- there's more, but it would take the better part of the day to list them all. Most of us see those scars on our nation and recognize them not just as scars but as sins. And if Christians can see the sins in those examples, surely we can see the sin in today's concentration camps. But maybe not all Christians do see it. And if they don't see it, I wonder why. It's no great mystery. We get our news from polarized sources. What news you watch isn't just what's on your TV, it's part of your identity. So, not all Christians do see the same news. Some watch a single station and are shocked by the things their neighbors tell them. "I haven't heard that" and "I don't believe that" have become synonymous with "that did not happen." Mercifully, reality doesn't care what we've heard or what we believe. Reality keeps trucking along. And maybe we hear from a family member, a friend, a trusted mentor and just can't square what they say with what's on our preferred news station. Better to disregard a trusted mentor than change the channel, even if that means sacrificing the truth in exchange for preserving an identity increasingly distant from the teachings of Christ.

If you only get your news from one or two places, channels or people or whatever, if you only get your news from one or two places, you've got a mighty thin view of reality, regardless of where you land on the political spectrum. There is real suffering landing on all kinds of people, and more Christians than I can fathom either don't see it or don't care. So here's my homework for y'all. This week, for one week only, try something out. Get your news from somewhere else. Keep reading or watching or listening to whoever you read or watch or listen to, if you like. But add a source from a perspective you're used to dismissing or turning a blind eye to. Maybe that means Fox or Breitbart. Maybe it's Mother Jones or Democracy Now. For extra credit, watch some international news to see what they're saying about us.

For some, this will be very hard. You will hear justifications and spins that will make your stomach turn. For others, this will be very hard. You will hear stories and reports of suffering that will make your stomach turn. I want all y'all to entertain the possibility that what you hear is true. It may not be, but we don't stand a chance if we can't see the other side's positions, and we'll never understand their positions if we never see them. Fact-checking is hard, especially when so many are so invested in keeping the truth under a bushel

basket. Talk to people you wouldn't normally talk to, ask what they've heard, ask what they've seen, ask them to show you why they care. We'll never get out of this if we can't see how they got stuck in the coordinated whirlwind of lies. So look, for God's sake, look. And see. And don't you dare turn your back.

The great promise of Lent is that while the brokenness of our world came through a single man, redemption comes through a single man, too. Mind you, that single man was Jesus, but maybe we've got some of that promise to us, too. Just one of us seeing something new could be the spark that changes all of this, spreads that desperately needed light, and opens our eyes to see, to care, to actually do something about it. That's why Ash Wednesday's hard. That's why Lent's hard. It doesn't let us off the hook. It holds our heads steady so our eyes can see. And it begs us to recognize the truth for what it is: there are real people really suffering in real life right now. If you can't see it, it's not because it isn't happening. It's because you aren't seeing it.

I'm gonna end with that prayer from Ash Wednesday, and while we pray now and all the way through the end of Lent, I want you to consider what's more important: the channel you keep your TV on or the human need and suffering you refuse to face. "Accept our repentance, Lord, for the wrongs we have done: for our blindness to human need and suffering, and our indifference to injustice and cruelty."