

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent

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So, there's this forum on the internet that I can't say the name of from the pulpit, but it's amazing. It's abbreviated AITA, which stands for "Am I The Jerk?" Only, it's not "jerk." Users sign on and write up a story about some event in their lives and ask the community to weigh in. Am I the jerk? Is someone else the jerk? Is everyone involved a jerk? I love it. I will admit to reading it with a degree of schadenfreude once or twice, but mostly I'm actually invested in what's going on. See, what I love about this forum is that it's a place where people come together and tell the honest truth. The poster lays out a scenario that's causing them strife, and then the commenters respond. They'll say things like, "Yeah, bud, you messed this one up." or "Wow, no one comes out of this smelling like roses." And once in a rare while, you get, "this one's no one's fault. Awful things just happen sometimes."

There's a beauty to the anonymity that allows people to share stories without trying to paint themselves in a good light. And when they do try to paint themselves in a good light, those internet people pick right up on it and call them out. The thing is, none of this is done out of malevolence. It's a cherished space where people search out honesty, even if it might hurt to say and even if it might hurt to hear. It reminds me a little bit of AA meetings. I don't know how many of you have been to AA or some similar thing. I went with my dad when he was struggling. Rachel Held Evans says those spaces are some of the best examples of what church should be that she'd ever experienced. Because when we enter those places, instead of putting on our Sunday Best clothes and Sunday Best facades, we walk in acknowledging that there's something we've messed up, and then we name it out loud to a whole bunch of other people that've also messed up, and then we tell each other the truth about all those messes. That forum, "Am I The Jerk" is the internet's version of a truth-telling, accountable space. It's beautiful and generous and sometimes dark but always real. And I'd even venture to say it's sacred. Come on, you had to know that was coming. I am a preacher, after all. Yeah, that internet forum is a sacred place in the digital world. Are they talking about God? Usually not, but they are talking about how to treat people with dignity and respect, and as we're gearing up for the Incarnation, treating people with dignity and respect ought to be high on our checked twice list.

Advent is a funny time of year. We spend a lot of time in church talking about getting ready and trying to wait just as long as we can before the big explosion of Christmas comes roaring in. And then we go home and prepare in other ways, getting the tree up, wrapping presents, realizing we forgot someone on our list, lamenting the price of postage, worrying about travel plans, fretting over recipes, missing loved ones, missing traditions, praying the world will return to 1,000,000 percent normal. We really lean into the anticipation side of the season, don't we? And I love it. We absolutely should. But there's another side of Advent that we tend to dislike. That's the more penitential side. I get it. Believe me, do I get it. No one wants to plan for the holidays and beat themselves up at the same time. Shoot, no one wants to beat themselves up any time of year. In the past, I've tried to soften this side of Advent. I've talked about cleaning the house in preparation for a guest, and then doing the same thing with our hearts and minds and souls. I still like that image. Penitence as spiritual house cleaning rather than auto-flagellation.

But there's another thing that occurs to me this year. As we prepare for the coming of Christ, it might not be a bad idea to remind ourselves of where we're headed with this story. Sure, maybe this is a little bit like reading the last page of the book before you start it, but I suspect no one's gonna be terribly surprised by spoilers in the Greatest Story Ever Told. At the end of Jesus' life, he will be crucified, taking on the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future, and he will die there. And he will rise again, a clean slate for all of humanity. That's us. Forgiven, and that starts, or restarts, now. Great, right? I mean, if that doesn't put the

“good” in Good News. Sure does, but also, it doesn’t exactly let us off the hook, not completely. I think what helps me the most in understanding all of this is that Jesus’ death means there’s a massive weight of guilt lifted off of us, and if you come away from this sermon feeling guilty, then I haven’t done my job. There’s a lightness that comes with Christ.

But, where the idea of “sin” *is* useful is in helping us figure out those places we’ve messed up and consider how to fix them. Sin is all those places where, when we ask the internet if we’re the jerk, they say, “Yeah, bud.” And seasons like Advent are invitations to set them right. As we prepare for Christmas, maybe that means setting aside some time to call an old friend we’ve hurt or a sibling we haven’t heard from in years or a business partner or a neighbor or a waiter, anyone we’ve hurt, anyone we think about in the middle of the night when our brains return to that replayed tape of our failures, that stuff. That’s where our accountability as Christians comes in.

Now, a few things about that accountability stuff. First off, it’s not easy, and it’s not especially fun. Sometimes the people you reach out to are going to receive what you say with grace, and sometimes they won’t. That’s not on you. You can only offer yourself. Most of the time, though, I think you’ll be surprised. Most of the time people are gracious and grateful. Sometimes they won’t even know what you’re talking about! What eats at you as a moment you’re deeply ashamed of isn’t even a memory for them. Funny how that works.

Second, it’s a delicate thing I’m asking us all to do. There are some situations where reaching out can be incredibly healing. But there are also some where doing so would actually cause more harm. I can’t give you a hard and fast rule for which are which. You have to figure that out. But if you’re seeking reconciliation solely to make yourself feel better and not to actually heal the wound, that’s a pretty good indication that maybe your path to setting the world right needs to be a little different. We’ve gotta be careful not to make things worse in seeking out forgiveness. Maybe there are other ways to come at setting the world right. When we’re the jerk, sometimes we can fix it directly, but sometimes we have to get creative and balance the scales indirectly. Put differently, do no harm.

Third -- and this is a big one -- our world is bizarre, and when it comes to accountability and sin and blame and all that stuff, it can get real difficult to suss out where our fault lies versus someone else’s. The world can be a manipulative place, and other people can be, too. We all carry something we’re not proud of. That’s the sort of stuff we need to fix. But some of us carry wrongs that are not ours to carry. That’s not up to us to fix. That’s someone else’s stuff that they’ve unfairly laid on us. It is really, really hard to figure out what’s what. And that’s where having sounding boards comes in handy. Like close friends, or AA meetings, or internet forums, or, at our best, churches. These are places where other kind people can help you figure out what’s yours and what’s not.

But the connecting thread in all of these things comes down to why I decided to talk about sin just a few weeks before Christmas. It’s not to make you feel bad or to remind you of your low place in the cosmos. No, I bring all this up because of what comes out of actually doing this work. And that’s relief. It might be the single most important gift you ever give to yourself, and it might be the single most important gift you ever give to the world. I cannot promise you it will come easy or fast or even gentle. But it will come. Relief. That’s the entire point of the Incarnation: repairing relationship and providing relief. And that’s what we long for this time of year. That empty spot on the couch, that one person you just don’t buy gifts for anymore, that one address you always wonder if you should send this year’s card to, that’s where we hurt the most and -- provided we’re not causing more harm to them or to ourselves -- that’s where we lean. Into sacred forgiveness, sacred repair, sacred and light relief.