

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent Mark 1:9 - 15

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Well, folks, here we are: the First Sunday of Lent, when we turn our faces along with Christ toward the next forty days and the pain of the cross that awaits us there. I love this season. There's something about Lent that gives a sense of highlighted purpose. Like, the entire rest of the year with its celebrations and stories and reminders of the normal Christian Life, all that's just training for our journey here as we walk with Jesus to the end. It's thrilling, it's tough, and it's as real as our seasons get. Because now, we have to do the single hardest thing a human can do: look at ourselves honestly. Now, normally, Lent is a great time for me to reflect on my life, pick out those places I haven't done my best and then commit to doing better. It's like our second chance at failed New Year's resolutions. Only we don't just look at our physical selves, we look at our being, who we've allowed ourselves to become at our core, what we've let glom onto our very souls. It's tough. But usually, I'm pretty good at coming up with a discipline.

I gave up meat one year because I'd heard about just how bad massive beef farms are for the environment, and I didn't want my own existence to rely on damaging the earth. Every time I passed a steakhouse or smelled a burger, I have to admit, I really struggled. But each struggle-filled waft of grass-fed, pan-seared temptation wasn't just an empty, anti-hedonist self-denial. It was a reminder that what I was doing for those forty days ultimately was to bring me closer to God. Another year, I gave up sticking my foot in my mouth, clearly it was a much needed discipline. That Lent taught me to think before I spoke and to consider what my words might do to others. That may be a lesson I need to revisit. Last year, I told folks I was giving up everything. I'd realized that I didn't have much time in my life that didn't involve a screen, a book, a distraction of some kind. So every day I sat in complete silence for 15 seconds more than the previous day. It wasn't meditating so much as seeing how long I could stand to exist in silence. Things went pretty well until the middle of Lent, when we all gave up just about everything. And it's there that we find ourselves now, entering into Lent again and thinking about disciplines we might take on or bad spiritual habits we might give up.

I gotta admit, trying to think of what to give up this year is tough. I've barely seen another person outside of my household since well into last year. I can't go to the gym. I make it through each day and feel like that's an accomplishment. Spiritual malaise isn't the problem, it's, well, it's all of that stuff in the world. I suppose I could take on being nicer to people, but Becca and Steve are just about the only ones that would see that. I could give up coffee, but that's a rare treat in a treatless time. I could try the silence thing again, I suppose. Or I could sweep more. Or I could teach the dogs more tricks. But none of that really feels like Lent. There's an old saying that says "You can't be a Christian alone," and I'm really feeling that these days. We are existing together as best we can, of course, but I wonder if part of the power of the gathered community is how it serves as a mirror into our own failings.

Being with the community, we're aware of ourselves in ways we aren't when we're alone. And while there are certainly ways that the anxiety of the agora can work on us negatively, I wonder if there's something helpful in being seen by others and imagining how we're seen by others that shows us what we need to correct in ourselves. Like, when I stuck my foot in my mouth so much that I had to give it up for Lent, had I been alone, no one would've heard my stupid thoughts, and I could shrug them off. But because I shared them and saw the pain or the disgust in other people's faces, I knew there was something in myself that needed fixin'. In community, especially in Christian community, we're laid bare. We share the reality of ourselves, not some polished facade we hope will fool the assembly. And while that's scary, it's also really powerful.

A quick pair of caveats: this power of the congregation isn't always a good thing. There are far too many lessons from history that show how dangerous it can be to give the gaze of gathered believers full run of the place. Shame is a mighty powerful force, and it's oh-so-tempting to wield it. But being seen fully (and without

too much of that shame stuff) might actually help us figure ourselves out. Also, it's far too easy to obsess over something the community's said. Or worse, something we've imagined the community's said. Boy, I can obsess over something I think someone might've thought for days, and I'll get mad about it, and I'll resent them for it, and I'll feel my shoulders get tight from worrying about having to see them again until something finally comes along and reminds me that I made the whole thing up from the start! But, again, being seen fully (and without too much of that imagined insult stuff) might actually help us figure ourselves out.

It all goes back to the honesty of the community. And y'all, we are a deeply honest and healthy community. About this time last year, I saw y'all turn that honesty onto yourselves. Last year, when we got word of the migrant worker family that was in so much trouble, y'all didn't hesitate to see their plight and try to do something about it. You recognized your own part in the tragedy, and you rallied. This probably seems perfectly natural and unremarkable to all of you, but that's because you don't know just how good you are. I've been in Christian communities that never would've done that. The difference between you and some of those other places comes down to a major distinction, the distinction between compassion and pity. You are a compassionate community. You see pain in the world and you're moved to do something about it. But pity? Pity is just a spectator sport. Pity sees suffering and simply says, "what a shame." I think that's what I'd like to work on in myself this Lent. I know that now, my kneejerk is pity. I know that compassion is something I have to think about and choose to do. But I think compassion can become a reflex. Y'all are evidence of that. And if you don't feel that way, then maybe you can work on shifting from pity to compassion with me, too.

I read a story the other day from George Orwell. When he was fighting in the Spanish Civil War, he was sent to the frontline, in his own words, "to shoot fascists." Waiting with weapon in hand, he saw a man running to deliver a message to an officer behind enemy lines. Orwell says, "He was half-dressed and was holding up his trousers with both hands as he ran. I refrained from shooting at him. ... I did not shoot partly because of that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself." I'm not sure if Orwell felt pity or compassion in that moment, but I know that what he saw was no longer the label. He saw a human being, in all its frailty, and he saw the reality of the world sprint across his field of vision. The enemy ahead was just another guy with pants that didn't fit and a pitiable hand clutched to his waist in place of a belt.

The Episcopal priest Fleming Ruledge says that "When God looks at us, God does not see titles, bank accounts, club memberships, vacation homes, net worth. He sees frail, vulnerable creatures trying to cover up our spiritual nakedness. When Jesus came down from heaven to live among us, he lived among us at that level. The Son of God gave up all his divine prerogatives and came into the world to be a fellow-creature with us in our deepest need. We were God's enemies, deserving of death; but he looked on us trying to hold up our trousers ... and declared that we were not enemies but friends." Jesus himself knows that feeling of rushing about with a message in one hand and ill-fitting trousers in the other because he's been here with us. We're joined to him in our baptisms and his. We're joined to him as his face turns to Jerusalem and ours go there, too. And we're joined to him as this long walk takes him to the cross where his gift meets our failing.

I don't know exactly where I've rushed around this year with ill-fitting ideas of myself held too dear. I just know I've made it this far and hope to make it further. And I know that I've had an eye towards pity and a heart hardened against compassion. I think back to Hillbilly Elegy and how reading that book made me see what I know too closely and take some pride in not being *that*. I think of the hand-painted sign and upside-down flag on the north side of Sherburne, and I feel some sense of being better than whoever wrote it. I think of the education I've received and how my education has made me understand things the ignorant just can't, and I know the growing list of books I've read can puff me up to where I'm a little too big for these sagging britches.

What I have fallen into is the trap of looking at the uneducated or the poor or the politically despicable with pity. What a shame. I can be a spectator. I can watch with disgust. And I can comment on what's wrong with the world without having to lift a finger. And the particular world we live in, where going outside isn't even a great option, has amplified that tendency in myself. Maybe it has in you, too? But compassion? These days? No, I've lost track of compassion. I don't *want* to be compassionate. I want other people to read the same books I've read. I want other people to see how they're wrong. I want other people to fix themselves so we can have a civil conversation. I don't want to be compassionate. But I do *need* to be. And so do you. So I wonder if there's a way to use our time in varying degrees of isolation to foster a growing sense of compassion. I wonder if there's a way to see through Orwell's eyes the enemy running with orders with more than pity. I wonder if there's a way to extend our heart across difference and into action, or at least desire for action. Action may not come until after our doors fly open again, but at least we can train our hearts to look beyond the "fascist" or the "antifascist" to the human being that bears the label.

So, my Lenten discipline leans into that space. During Lent, whenever I read a headline or see a news report that makes my blood boil, I'm going to imagine the voice of God booming from above with a claim that this person, too, is a child of God, the Beloved. Not free from consequence, not immune to justice, but still Beloved. There's something sacred to them, always, but maybe this will help me to see it and to honor it. Ted Cruz goes to Cancun while his state freezes? Beloved Child of God. Joe Biden leaves hundreds out of jobs with executive order? Beloved Child of God. The poor in Houston line up for water from city park fountains? Beloved Children of God. Migrant worker deported? Child separated at border lost by the government? Beloved children of God on the receiving end, and God help me, Beloved children of God on the other side, too. This is going to be a hard Lent. Beloved, I'm gonna need your compassion.