

Lent 1A 2023

During Lent, we talk a lot about sin.

On this first Sunday in Lent, we might as well start by discussing what sin is.

You have probably heard that the word translated as sin means “to miss the mark.”

In other words, it means that we try and do not succeed, but we can be forgiven and try again.

This is clear enough, but what does this “missing the mark” look like concretely?

What leads to it?

We see some examples in the temptation of Jesus.

As soon as Christ is baptized, that is, as soon as he commits himself to taking up his responsibility to God and others, he realizes the sacrifices that will entail, and he starts having second thoughts.

He imagines other ways of being that are easier.

We are all familiar with these second thoughts.

As soon as we think of pledging, for example, we start to talk ourselves out of it.

“Well, inflation is not over. I think my car is getting older and may need more work.

My wind and hail insurance might be going up.”

It is the same with most commitments.

When we are engaged to be married, we call it getting cold feet.

We can what if things to death.

As for Jesus' second thoughts, we went over those a few weeks ago, so I will only give a brief review here, but from a different perspective.

First, he considers the fact that he could simply take care of himself, see to his own needs, make his own bread, and ignore any other responsibilities.

He comes to the conclusion, however, that that is insufficient.

To take care solely of one's own needs is to ignore our common dependence upon God.

He then considers, if God is so powerful, why not just let God take care of everything.

We can throw ourselves down without a care and let God handle it.

But then he realizes that *we* are the hands of God in the world.

We are not to cast off our responsibility to others or to ourselves.

Finally, he thinks about power.

He could command everyone else to do the right thing, to take care of one another's needs, even, and then there would be no scapegoating, no escape from responsibility.

Except, people need to come to God willingly.

We cannot force love.

In the end, Jesus realizes that we cannot simply ignore God, expect God to do everything, or force people to love.

If we are to make this existence meaningful, if we are to use our time wisely, as our teachers always told us, then we must accept our responsibility to others, to ourselves, and to God.

We must accept that we are all interdependent.

So sin takes the forms of only taking care of oneself, of expecting God to take care of our every need, or forcing others to do the right thing, but is there a common link among all three approaches?

They all are rooted in the notion that *our* needs are more important than the needs of others.

We see examples of this all around us.

We see it when a company dumps forever chemicals into our water supply.

It appears when we try to pass laws to regulate the expression of others.

It shows itself when when we refuse to make sacrifices for the common good.

We may want wind turbines, for example, but we do not want to be the ones looking at them, or hearing them.

Sin can be quite sneaky.

For example, it hides in religion.

I remember bringing up the topic of long work hours at a church I served in New York.

A lay leader immediately said, “You have to sacrifice, Father!”

It was interesting that I was always the one who should sacrifice, and someone else was always the one who knew exactly what that sacrifice should be.

Sadly, some are very attracted to this approach.

A different response would have been, “We are concerned about your well being, just as we know that you are concerned about ours. What can we do?”—mutuality rather than superiority.

Feelings of superiority stem from a failure to understand that God loves us all equally.

From God’s perspective, no one person’s needs are more important than another’s.

A starving person is a starving person is a starving person, and that includes those who are starving for love, community, meaning, like those teenagers who are reporting increased levels of sadness and hopelessness.

It is hard for us to accept it, but God loves Putin as much as God loves us.

We are like children who want to believe that our parents love us the most, but God is love.

If God stopped loving someone, God would stop being.

Do not misunderstand.

God grieves when we abuse another, but God still loves us all the same, and all our needs are equally significant.

Thinking otherwise, thinking that *our* needs are the most important, is pride.

C. S. Lewis pointed out that pride was the sin of Lucifer.

Being the most beautiful of all the angels and the bringer of light, Lucifer thought he was the most important.

He became prideful.

I do not mean pride in the sense of taking pride in one's work.

I mean pride as in "My needs are more important."

Well, it was a long journey, but we finally have our answer.

Pride is the foundation of sin.

On Ash Wednesday, we were encouraged to a period of self-denial.

Some hear that as meaning self-mortification or self-torture, which is pointless and itself can become the source of pride.

"Look at me! My hair shirt is the hairiest!"

In the Christian context, self-denial actually refers to denying that our needs are more important than others.

It is the acceptance of our equality before God.

It is letting go of pride, and when we do that, we miss the mark much less often.

It allows us to celebrate our wonderful brotherhood and sisterhood with others, to celebrate our oneness, as we do in the Eucharist, where we bask in God's love for all.