

Lent 1
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Families

I knew a child once who overheard one parent intervene with the other just before a punishment was to be meted out. "Please stop! The poor boy is so afraid of doing wrong that he can't do right!" It breaks my heart. What can you say when you're so afraid of doing wrong that you can't do right? It's a trap with no release button. It's a box into which no light shines. It's the devil appearing as an angel of light.

Thankfully, that's not how God works with us. In today's Gospel lesson, the evangelist gives us the sparsest of details on the launch of Jesus' ministry. There is no elaboration on the temptations, as in Matthew and Luke, and even his going out to preach is stripped down to the bare minimum. The one piece of "extra" we get is that amazing experience of Jesus seeing the Spirit descend on him and hearing the Creator's voice of approval, but I think it is telling. The story begins in glory. The story begins in approval. Temptation and trial, those difficult formative moments at the beginning, come built on a deep foundation of blessing.

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. We began the service with the Great Litany. There is no more protracted penitential piece in our whole Book of Common Prayer, but it comes after the season of Epiphany when we celebrated Jesus as the Light of the World, which comes after Christmas when we celebrate God-With-Us, the glorious birth of this glorious child, which comes after Advent, when we build toward that momentous day. Lent is always built on the foundation of glory. We are free to repent, because we know we repent before a God whose heart knows and desires the best for us and for the world, and this is what it takes to get there. We are free to repent, because we are not like that child who was so afraid to do wrong that he could not do right; because we have confidence in God's mercy; because we have hope.

The theme for this Lent is fitting therefore. It might not sound very penitential, but it captures that confidence. This Lent is a season in which we hold on to hope to carry on, in our families, in our parish, in our community, in our nation and in our world. There are five Sundays in Lent, and five concentric circles in which we hold onto hope.

How do we live this out in our families?

Resurrección is launching a youth group, and we gathered with four of them at Big Scoop a week ago. We played a little game where we each took four M&M candies of different colors. Each color represented a question by which to get to know one another, "What is your favorite animal and why?" "What is your favorite movie?" That sort of thing. One of them was, "What can you not live without?" One young lady's response was priceless.

Immediately she blurted out, "My family."

Family consists of our most given of relationships. My three boys are the children of Karisse and me, and there's just nothing they can do about that. We are all bound together by biology and history and culture and language in ways we share with no one else. If there were ever a set of relationships in which we ought to be able to have hope of forgiveness, it should be here, one would think, and yet, it is precisely here that we most often struggle. After all, it was the parents of this child whose story introduced this sermon. With family the stakes are highest. Perhaps because of this, it is often the case that when we are out of sorts in other areas of our lives, we often take it out on the ones closest to us, our families, our most loved ones. It's hardly fair, yet all too common.

Forgiveness among families is perhaps the most important and the most difficult, so, we start Lent with the greatest challenge. We stand before the greatest temptation. Will we build up these vital relationships, or will we tear them down?

Let's build them up.

Tell the truth. When Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the Spirit descending upon him as a dove, and a voice from heaven spoke and said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Here we see the truth of who Jesus is for us Christians.

There are a lot of truths in family relationships, things done and left undone, things we wish we could have or would have said, etc. But there are some fundamental truths that should be named first. You are family. You are a nucleus and core relationship in society. You are linked together by choice and birth. Let seeking and granting of forgiveness start here. Then, the truth of what was said or unsaid, done or undone, must be told. There is no reconciliation without a full naming of the truth. More than one version will undoubtedly come out, but name them all. Find common ground, and hammer out a way forward that honors those truths. Tell the truth, everyone's truth, and each one's truth.

Let go of the pain, but not the responsibility.

"And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him." In the gospels of Matthew and Luke we have two angles on just what happened in the wilderness. In each of them, Jesus is tempted to go beyond what is his. To each of them Jesus responds with words from Scripture. The devil is constantly trying to get him to cross the line, but Jesus is a good boundary keeper.

Repentance and reconciliation involve boundaries. Pain may very well have been caused, and that is a truth, but pain alone is not a reason to take responsibility. If I am driving down the highway at 90 miles an hour and a state patrol officer stops me for speeding, the

ticket will cause me pain, but the pain has a purpose and a motivation. It is supposed to get me to slow down. My pain is not the officer's responsibility, it is mine.

Naming the pain is part of the process, but never the end. Yes, our actions may have caused pain, or we may have felt pain because of someone else's actions, but the pain itself is not ultimately the offender's responsibility. It is the offended one's responsibility. All the offender can do is seek reconciliation. The offended one needs to let the pain teach them wisdom and compassion and then let it go. Otherwise, it causes a root of bitterness to spring up in the heart that destroys the soul.

We seek forgiveness for the wrongs we have done, because they were damaging to the relationship, because they were morally unacceptable, because they did not reflect the loving heart of God. We seek to let the pain we experience teach us wisdom and compassion, and then to let it go.

Let go of the pain, but not the responsibility, both to repent, and to forgive.⁴

Celebrate what you have.

"Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'" Just before this, Mark records that John is put in prison. He is no longer there to pave the way for Jesus. Things in God's plan have shifted and it's Jesus' turn now.

When we seek reconciliation in a family, the dynamics shift just a bit. Repentance and reconciliation clear the air, but they also shift the boundaries of responsibility. A new way of being family together, be it ever so slightly altered, emerges, something healthier, something stronger, something wiser, something that has drawn a bit nearer to God's heart of self-giving love. The family must step up to the plate now.

Reconciliation is sacred work. It's what Jesus came to do. When we repent and reconcile, the veil between heaven and earth becomes thin for a while. God has been among us. So, when it is all said and done, go with it. Don't lose the ground you've gained. Build on it. It's time to make new memories around the new family order, to recall one another when we try to slide back into the old ways. It's time to proclaim good news.

Hope to carry on in our families it is hardest, but most important. It takes careful work, but it is sacred work, it is divine work, because it is working with God in what God is doing in the world. When we repent and reconcile in families, we proclaim that we believe that God is healing and restoring the world, and that we are recipients of and participants in that healing and restoration.