

“Introspection and Grace”
Lent 1C (March 10, 2019)
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word, Amen.<<

An older clergy friend of mine once confessed to me a childhood sin he'd committed. He was raised a Protestant in a time when Catholics and Protestants lived in friction. When he was in elementary school, periodically, some of the Catholic students in the local parish would be allowed to leave school for catechesis classes with the priest. My friend admitted to feelings of jealousy and envy when he saw his classmates leaving school. But these weren't the sins he confessed to me the day he shared his story. One day, he told me, he'd had enough of watching his fellow elementary school students get to skip class while he and the other Protestants languished in school. So, he grabbed his coat and snuck onto the bus as they were leaving. It just so happened that a different priest was leading catechesis that day, and that priest assumed all the children on the bus were Catholics. The lesson the new priest was teaching at church was on confession. To encourage the students to confess, the priest offered \$1 - a dollar went a long way back then - to the student who told him something he'd never heard before. My friend was quick to note as he told this story, that offering absolution in exchange for money was something that divided Catholics and Protestants in the first place, five hundred years ago. The students all sat in the pews on one side of the church, while the priest sat on the other side, and each student went over to confess. When it was my friend's turn, the priest said to him, “What do you have to confess, my son?” My friend squirmed for a moment and then came clean. “I snuck onto the bus to come here today when I wasn't supposed to. I'm a Protestant.” The priest gave him the dollar.

In an op-ed in *The New York Times* back in September,¹ Jonathan Beale probed the issue of confession by talking about the inner turmoil of one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein once admitted that “Working in philosophy was really more a working on oneself” - a working on oneself that meant being honest with oneself - a point he gleaned in part from Nietzsche, his predecessor of several decades, and a point both of them gleaned from the ancient Socrates, who argued that “being honest with oneself is the most philosophical act of all.” “Nothing is so difficult,” wrote Wittgenstein, “as not deceiving oneself.” It takes courage, he said, to admit one's limitations, to be honest with oneself and to admit when one needs help. He took this philosophy to extremes in WWI, when he requested to serve in the forward observation post of No Man's Land, one of the most dangerous posts in the army. He was testing his resolve, teaching himself courage and learning to confess his fears. He confided in his diary, “Yesterday I was shot at. I was scared! I was afraid of death. I now have such a desire to live.”

Wittgenstein drew inspiration to be honest with himself from that old church Bishop from Hippo in North Africa, St. Augustine. Augustine wrote his *Confessions* in the year 400 - a book that is one long prayer to God, in which he bares his soul, his inner struggles with temptation and doubt, and admits in prayer that no one who makes confession to God teaches God what's inside their heart, since God already knows what's in there. Or, to put this in the words of Northumbrian Christians a few centuries later: there's no point in trying to offer

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/opinion/wittgensteins-confession-philosophy.html>

God an edited self in prayer. God sees us as we are; knows our motives; knows our internal battles; and God loves us anyway.

St. Augustine drew inspiration to confess from the apostle Paul in the passage we heard a moment ago from Romans 7. There Paul admits to an inward struggle: “I do not do the good I want,” he writes, “but the evil I do not want is what I do.” “I do not understand my own actions.” Scholars have long debated whether the struggle Paul describes is his own personal one, or whether he’s borrowing wording from Greek philosophy to describe a broader human condition - what the late astronomer Stephen Hawking said was a struggle between our impulses as a species and our rationality.² Our impulses to be aggressive and dishonest to get ahead, to turn a blind eye to the suffering of others, to allow our value as human beings to be shaped by the opinions of others, or to equate self-worth with success in life. We all know that aggression and dishonesty can be shortcuts; we know that empathy toward the suffering of others is essential; and we know, because we hear it in church, that we are precious and worthy of love and accepted just as we are. And yet, if we’re honest with ourselves - if we don’t edit ourselves - we know that sometimes we can be overly aggressive in speech or actions; and we do sometimes doubt ourselves and waver and question our worth.

The New Testament says that Jesus struggled in every way just like us - it says he was tempted in every way that we are. Today’s gospel reading narrates three of those temptations. Luke, the storyteller, says that after his baptism in the Jordan river, Jesus was whisked into the wilderness by the spirit of God where he fasted for 40 days. The number 40 is rich with symbolism in the Bible: Noah’s flood was brought about because of 40 days of rain; the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for 40 years; the prophet Elijah traveled without food for 40 days; King David reigned for 40 years; Moses fasted for 40 days before receiving the Ten Commandments; Lent, the season we are now in as a church - the season of confession and introspection and self-examination, symbolized by the liturgical color of purple - lasts 40 days, from Ash Wednesday to Easter. Jesus fasted in the wilderness for 40 days, says Luke. And at the end of those 40 days, famished and weak, Luke says he faced three tests - three temptations, to turn stones into bread, to seize power over the kingdoms of the world, and to do the spectacular to gain renown. Theologians in Christian history have argued with each other over what the temptations mean: some have keyed each temptation to a specific sin such as gluttony or vanity or ambition; others have read the story as a metaphorical warning against heresy (Origen of Alexandria said the stones were false teaching); still others have seen the temptations as attempts to derail Jesus’ mission of going to the cross; and others have seen the temptations in purely psychological terms, as Jesus’ internal wrestling with what Carl Jung called the “shadow side” of human nature.

But maybe the three temptations are not so different from temptations any one of us might face in life. Take the first temptation for example. Jesus, gaunt and wasted, is enticed by the devil to turn stones into bread to fill his starving belly. Maybe this is an immediate gratification temptation - a temptation that any one of us might face in a moment of weakness, a temptation to say something or do something or consume something in the urge of the moment that’s not in our long-term interest. Or, the second temptation, when Jesus is brought to a high mountain. There the devil displays the kingdoms of the world and offers them to Jesus if he would just bow the knee to the god of power. Maybe this temptation is

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<https://www.techtimes.com/articles/200655/20170308/stephen-hawking-predicts-human-destruction-from-technological-advances.htm>

about taking shortcuts - the temptation to take the easy road to advancement and betterment instead of the way of sacrifice. Or, the final temptation, which occurs on the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. "Throw yourself down," says the devil, God's angels will save you, and everyone will think well of you. Maybe this is a temptation to seek the approval of people in order to feel worthy or successful or accepted. Immediate gratification; shortcuts to success; seeking self-worth in the approval of others. The season of Lent is an invitation to think on our struggles; to nail them to the cross on Good Friday; and to be set free on Easter Sunday.

In her Lenten podcast for this year,³ Reverend Amy Butler, Senior Minister at Riverside Church in New York, urges churches to foster safe places where we can live authentically, where we can name our struggles, where we can be honest with ourselves, where we can find acceptance and grace regardless of the temptations we face or the temptations we've succumbed to. Church is not a place, she says, where we need to "show up looking bright and shiny and perfect," where God "expects us to be something better than we are." Church is a place where it's okay for us to be honest with ourselves, and to confess "the ways in which" we "have failed ... and continue to fail." And when we admit our failures, she says, we can begin to experience grace, and see the church as "a group of beautiful, beloved, flawed creatures" who trust in the power of love to save us.

Writer Rachel Hackenberg, in an article titled "I Let the Holy Spirit See My Dirty Laundry,"⁴ tells the story of her struggle with authenticity in church. She writes, "The church in which I grew up had an implicit 11th commandment: thou shalt not air dirty laundry. I was born and raised in rural Pennsylvania, in a place where the air is clear, except on trash-burning days and manure-spreading days. When the weather cooperates, many households dry their washed laundry outdoors on clotheslines. ... Clotheslines are intended for laundry that's been washed, of course. No one wants or expects to see their neighbors' dirty laundry flapping in the wind. ... The same principle was sacred in the social expectations at our church. ... I learned from a young age that faith always presented a strong and composed face in public and especially at church. You wore your Sunday best, sang your Sunday hymns, learned your Sunday school lessons, got your gold star for Sunday school attendance, and went merrily on your way without telling a single soul that you were bullied in school, or that your sister or daughter was gay, or that you were ready to collapse from parenting, or that your spouse struggled with depression. (Of course, as happens in a family church," she says, "even without airing your dirty laundry, eventually the whole congregation knew.) ... In sermons and in Sunday school and in the unspoken habits of church life," she says, "I learned that disciples responded to Jesus' call with a stiff upper lip. You followed him across stormy seas and into the time of trial, even up to the place of death, and there was little room along that journey for tears or drama. ... Being strong and determined, unflappable and reputable: these were the demonstrations of deep faith. How did I know? Because the little paper disciples on the felt board in Sunday school never talked back to Jesus or said that it was too hard. Because [I was never told] that life could kick [you around]" Hackenberg's life changed when her husband was arrested for a crime, which shattered her family and transformed her experience of church.

"We have some measure of control over our actual dirty laundry," she continues. "Perhaps a stray sock falls out on the floor next to the washing machine and gets dirty all over again. ...

³ <https://www.trcnyc.org/bsag-3-01/>

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/first-person/i-let-holy-spirit-see-my-dirty-laundry>

Maybe a [towel] strangles a sweater and you're stuck untangling the two in the middle of a Laundromat. Awkward, but manageable. ... It's much harder to control the dirty laundry of life Sitting in a [new] church ... one day," she writes, "I sobbed and stuttered but could not form the words to express the pain in my household. ... [In that church, I found grace. And I found that the spirit of God had] whispered [my secrets] into a few hearts who were willing to be God's presence to me through the crisis. Like a congregation sharing just enough whispers and hints of dirty laundry to know that a hot meal or a hospital visit was needed, a few dear people [in the church] held discreet space for the words that I could not say. ... While I continue to earnestly hold my faith together," she concludes, "the Spirit [of God] continues to have loose lips, whispering a holy nudging occasionally where it is needed. There are worse things in life than having the Spirit tell your secrets. I suppose I'm OK with the fact that she does."

Let me close this morning with a poem by writer Jan Richardson about Lent. It's called, "Beloved Is Where We Begin."

If you would enter into the wilderness [during Lent], do not begin without a blessing. Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you. Do not go without letting it echo in your ears, and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart, do not despair. That is what this journey is for. I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger, from fear, from hunger or thirst, from the scorching of sun or the fall of the night. But I can tell you that on this path there will be help. I can tell you that on this way there will be rest. I can tell you that you will know the strange graces that come to our aid only on a road such as this, that fly to meet us bearing comfort and strength, that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name: Beloved. Beloved. Beloved.

Amen.