

“Turning toward Abundance”

Wildwood Mennonite Church

Lent 3 - March 24, 2019

Sin. On my list of favourite subjects, trust me, sin has not been one of them. How about you? Did you get up this morning, look at your face in the mirror and say to no one in particular, “I want to go to church this morning to learn more about sin.” I have my doubts about that!

I expect that definitions of sin vary depending on the person with whom you are speaking. If I were to give my definition without checking a dictionary, I would say sin is that which we do for unhealthy reasons and which turns us away from God. A dictionary reminds me it can include things we neglect to do – and then it gets complicated after that.

A small handful of you have heard this story - but a few years ago, I enrolled in a course at Queen’s House called the “19th Annotation”, and over a period of about 6 or 7 months, among other things, I was committed to an hour spent in daily prayer. The Ignatian exercises follow the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus – and things were running quite smoothly for me... until November. November was spent with Jesus in the desert, and there in the wilderness we considered our sin.

After just a few days I was tired of sin – and the month had just begun. “You folks!” I thought, “You folks are way to caught up in thinking about sin!” I thought it was non-productive, a waste of time, and mostly, a poor motivator, not to mention, a real downer. I was tired of being in the wilderness, but, not being a quitter, after adding one more layer of

protective armor, I staunchly carried on, determined to get through with minimal damage to myself.

One morning, after a couple of weeks of devotional time spent fighting against this whole idea of sin, my well-armoured heart cracked. That morning I became very well aware that, indeed, I was a sinner. And that letting go of my guard, that awareness, freed me to face myself as I truly was and to write a couple of letters to persons I had hurt.

Through that I discovered that it wasn't so much them needing my apology, as that I needed to acknowledge my own weaknesses, not only to God, but especially to myself. I also recognized that any judgment I was inclined to place on others' decisions was entirely unfair, as I myself had made some of those same poor choices in younger days. So, no more pretending! A load I hadn't known existed, lifted that morning. I felt I became a more real person – certainly able to be more compassionate, understanding, and forgiving. It was a turning point I hope I never forget.

On Ash Wednesday, just a couple of weeks ago, some of us recognized our sins as we read through the readings accompanying the ritual for that evening. We poured out our sins of pride, our self-righteous zeal for perfection, our vicious grasp of our own destiny. We poured out our sins of spineless accommodation, failure to speak and our sins of coveting another's gifts or call, betraying confidences, and giving way to spasms of jealousy. We poured out our sins of hostile words, sullen silence, and fuming impatience, as well as our callous indifference, shriveling submission, and failure to protest injustice. We poured out our sins of careless disregard for boundaries and our sins of ignoring our own bodies, or refusing connection as well as our sins of filling our closets, and

hoarding smiles or love or mercy. We poured out our sins of giving without joy or refusing pleasure, disregarding our hungers, and forgetting about God.

If you think that's a long list of sins, let me assure you that was only some of them! Graham and I shared those readings, and whether I was reading my part or he was reading his, I kept thinking, "That's me. I should be reading those lines."

We all have weaknesses and unhealthy behaviours, and Jesus' word to us today is to repent; to turn around, away from the path that leads to destruction. We may say, "Hey, we're just human. What do you expect?"

But the thing is our "zeal for perfection" robs us of a certain joy in living and disables our ability to connect with others less "perfect" than ourselves. Our "callous indifference" or "failure to speak" renders us powerless to change our own lives or the lives of others - while "hoarding smiles or love or mercy" destroys connection and caring relationships, and "refusing pleasure" severely hampers an abundant life!

Not that our weaknesses inevitably lead to immediate punishment. But it IS true that there are natural causes that result from our action or our inaction. And it IS true that our sins; our weaknesses and failings, hinder our capacity to foster meaningful relationships and obstruct our ability to live lives filled with purpose, serving God and humanity. Repentance is about turning around, about changing direction. Repentance is about healing!

Quite a number of years ago, when telling some acquaintances about our involvement in Person Two Person (visiting persons in the PA penitentiary), they responded with, "What they need is Jesus!" While I confess that at the

time their answer seemed a bit simplistic, even trite, I now see a certain truth in it. For myself, knowing I am loveable and loved as I am by my merciful Creator has made all the difference, and the bond of love, also known as the Holy Spirit, has enriched my life with strong relationships. Jesus has shown the value of service to others and it is through Jesus that I have found purpose in life, although granted, it can be a winding and unpredictable path. This is a life-long learning - yet it only stands to reason that the sooner we turn toward God, the better for all concerned!

Now, I have to confess that it was in reading the commentaries on the gospel lesson that I discovered that Luke is all about repentance and so I'm going to blame Luke for having led us into the dry desert of sin this morning. However, as I claim when I'm driving out in the country, all roads lead home. And this road too, when we get turned around will lead us away from the dry desert of emptiness, and move us toward the streams of living water, toward a meaningful and purpose-filled life.

One spiritual discipline that has been helpful to me, but one that I don't follow often enough, is the Examen. If you're not familiar with it, it is a practice done, usually at the end of the day, to ask yourself these two basic questions:

When did I feel nearest God today?
And... When did God feel furthest away?

There are a number of ways to ask these questions, among them might be:

For what moment today am I most grateful?
For what moment today am I least grateful?

Or: When did I feel most alive today? Or least alive?

Or: What was today's high point? Or low point?

I have found this discipline to be a very helpful tool to help me discern what is meaningful in my life. Sometimes it also helps me to discern and determine future directions.

So, this past week, on a night when I might have just turned out the light and left the day behind without any further thought, I pulled out my journal and pondered the Examen questions. For starters, I was filled with gratitude (overwhelmed, really) as I recalled the gifts in the day – and through that experience, I felt God spoke to me about how I might better approach some of the more difficult tasks; those that feel like they sap the life out of me. They will still take work, but this plan holds the potential to be life-giving rather than that which drains me.

Jesus wants us to live abundantly, to live life with meaning. This is why repentance is required and why salvation/ healing is so generously offered. He says, when he describes himself as the good shepherd,

“Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:7-10)

This morning’s Call to Worship came under the heading “Invitation to Abundance”. Isaiah says, (and I’m reading from *The Message*):

2-5 “Come, buy your drinks, buy wine and milk.
Buy without money—everything’s free!
Why do you spend your money on junk food,
your hard-earned cash on cotton candy?

*(Huh! Pink fluff! I admit I like it, it brings back childhood memories
- but the satisfaction is short-lived! Anyway... he goes on:)*

Listen to me, listen well: Eat only the best,
fill yourself with only the finest.

Pay attention, come close now,
listen carefully to my life-giving, life-nourishing words.

This advice, “Fill yourself with only the finest”, reminds me of a young woman from NZ, who I had living with me one summer. She ate only organic, real food – and she claimed that when you choose your food well, you don’t need as much, plus you feel satisfied. I, on the other hand, can attest to the fact that eating junk food does not satisfy! It does not satisfy at all; it only makes me crave more junk food!

So what brings meaning? I have heard that the best question in a philosophy (or likely other classes too,) if you want to derail the professor, is to ask, “What is the meaning of life?”

Lacking a concise answer, here’s a song that I heard in my online devotional the other morning. The music style is contemporary, but I found it strangely comforting, and even somewhat mesmerizing. I’ll get the lyrics up so you can follow.

Mysterium Amoris^{1 2}

Mysterium amoris.
The meaning of life is the mystery of Love;
just as the roots of trees hold firm the soil,
so it is the roots of Love
that hold the ground of our being together.

The meaning of life is the mystery of love – amoris.
By stillness in the spirit
we awaken to the fresh source of our being,
and we move into the oneness that is God.
Mysterium amoris.

¹<http://anonpilgrim.blogspot.com/2009/06/mysterium-amoris.html?m=1>

²<http://www.eclassical.com/shop/17115/art54/4726154-26153a-747313303977.pdf>

So I won't attempt to explain what those words mean. The word "mystery" describes it well. I can only say that when we are rooted in God who is Love; when we are connected to God and to others - therein lies the potential for a meaningful, abundant life.

For me, abundance means strong relationships with family and friends that warm my heart! For you it might mean a sense of awe as you gaze at the full moon, or take in a breath of fresh spring air. It might mean some work of service, either exciting or mundane, that benefits your neighbour near or far. It might mean taking risks to work for justice and peace. It might mean creating something functional or something beautiful.

One of my devotionals last week asked the question, "How do you feel about the direction you're headed?" It's a good question to ask ourselves during this season. "How do you feel about the direction you're headed?"

Our gracious God keeps giving us more chances to become more Christ-like. There are a million ways to turn toward God's life-giving stream in order to live an abundant and fruitful life. Let us listen for the voice of our Creator. Let each of us consider: Where in our lives do we need to turn toward love and attention to God, others, or our self? How is God calling us to be filled with goodness?

May God grant us insight, wisdom, and strength to live the abundant life to which we have been called!