

Of course I knew the right thing to do. I have known the golden rule for a long time: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” I knew a Lenten Luncheon is no place to be selfish, but instead of passing the tray untouched to the person next to me, allowing them to have first pick of the sandwiches, I took two of the ham salad sandwiches for myself. I knew it was wrong and I felt guilty about it as soon as I did it, but I did it anyway. If you want my resignation for cause, I’ll gladly give it.

Seriously though, what does that say about my character? If I am unfaithful to God in something as simple as that, what greater evil might I be tempted to commit? I prayed for forgiveness, cleansing, and for protection that this simple act of selfishness not be allowed to grow into something bigger.

But let me turn the mirror on you. Look back over this past week and on the first 4 days of your 2017 Lenten journey. Perhaps your Christian walk has been perfect so far, but then again as you allow the Holy Spirit to search your heart and to examine your thoughts, words, and actions, it may be—in fact the chances are pretty good—that you too are not without sin.

You see, our truth, the truth about us that we would like to sweep under the rug and forget, is that we are at our very core sinners. Every last one of us is a sinner. I all began right there in the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Genesis: Genesis 2:15-17 say: *“The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”*

The command was clear and so were the consequences of disobeying that command. Adam and Eve both knew what God required. Nevertheless Genesis 3:6 tells us: *“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.”*

It didn’t take much. Eve entertained a conversation with the serpent and allowed her own reasoning to outweigh the clear command of God. Temptation combined with rationalization: that was the prescription for

the disaster that poisoned the whole human race and that remains the prescription for the disaster we bring into our lives today: **Temptation + rationalization = human disaster.**

In this morning’s reading from Romans 5, Paul explains in verse 12: *“... sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”* Romans 3:23 affirms the “all” part: *“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”*

Again, our truth is that we are sinners. The further truth, that we like to hear even less, is that we, in ourselves, are powerless to be anything else. Oh, some of us will hold up against temptation better or longer than others. Some of us are rather immune to some sins but attracted to others. Some of us will be less inhibited than others, but sooner or later sin’s poison works its way to the surface in every life; it’s who we are. Some of us are trying to rationalize that away right now, which doesn’t change the fact but only confirms it: we are all sinners. We are sinners by birth and sinners by choice. It’s an ugly unpopular fact but it’s a fact nonetheless. We are all sinners.

Genesis 3:7 is interesting and reveals to us that Adam and Eve were aware of their sin as soon as they committed it. Genesis 3:7 says, *“Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.”* In their act of rationalization they imagined that eating fruit from the forbidden tree would make them feel wonderful and powerful, but it did nothing of the sort. Instead, they felt vulnerable, ashamed, exposed. Their corporate act of rebellion against God’s law didn’t bring them closer to each other but drove a wedge between them, so that they felt compelled to hide their nakedness from one another and themselves from God. It turned out bad—really bad.

But did you know that it could have been worse? It could have been worse because God had said to them: *“when you eat from it (meaning the forbidden tree)—when you eat from it—you will certainly die.”* But they didn’t die when they ate the fruit, did they? It’s clear that Adam and Eve did not immediately die when they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. They lived and went on to have children together. First there were Cain and Abel. Then, Genesis 5:3-5 say: *“When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he*

named him Seth. After Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether Adam lived 930 years, and then he died.

There is a discrepancy between what God said would happen and what did happen when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. God said they would die right then but they went on to live for a very long time. What’s up with that? Sometimes I’ve spiritualized this passage by saying “they died spiritually or that they died to their connection with God,” but that doesn’t match the facts either. What does match the facts is this: God chose mercy over judgment.

When God confronted Adam and Eve, He told them about the negative consequences of their sin. Life would get much harder because of their choice to put their own desires and logic above God’s command, but they would not die then. How could that be? Genesis 3:21 gives us the answer. When Adam and Eve became sinners they tried to cover their shame with fig leaves, but Genesis 3:21 says, *“The lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.”* In other words, God provided a sacrifice. The life of an animal—probably several animals—was taken to provide coverings for Adam and Eve. **Thus God’s mercy triumphed over judgment.**

It’s interesting how much things have stayed the same and how much things have changed since Adam and Eve took the plunge for themselves and plunged us into the abyss of sin. After all these years and despite all our knowledge and technology, we continue to find ourselves trapped by sin’s embrace. Generation after generation sin continues to wreak havoc in personal lives, in marriages and homes, in communities, and in nations throughout the world. If you are in the habit of reading the newspaper headlines, watching the evening news on television or reading Google news on your laptop, probably 90% of what is being reported on is sin. Of course, they call it something else; crime, corruption, violence, or scandal—they won’t tell us it’s sin, but that’s what it all boils down to. It’s the poison of sin continuing to plunge people into moral darkness and death. We are of dust and, because of sin, to the dust we shall return—ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” This is our truth and this is where we begin our Lenten journey.

But as we look further into our Scripture readings for this morning we discover a greater truth—God’s passion. We all know the verse by 5

heart, or at least I hope we do: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Just as God so loved Adam and Eve that He provided a sacrifice to cover their nakedness, so God so loves us and provides a sacrifice to cover our nakedness and even more.

In our Scripture passage from Matthew 4:1-11, we see that Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. This seems like a mean thing for the Holy Spirit to do. It's the opposite of what we pray for in the Lord's Prayer, where we pray to the Lord *“Lead us not into temptation.”* But Jesus is led into temptation on purpose by God. Why was that?

The answer is that God was in the process of preparing a sacrifice for us. Hebrews 10:5 says, as rendered in the New Living Translation of the Bible, *“That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, “You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer.”* And, according to what we are told about sacrifices in the Old Testament, those sacrifices needed to be pure—*“without spot or blemish or any other imperfection”* is how it's stated in Scripture.

And, for the sake of our faith, we need to know that the sacrifice offered for us was and is worthy of acceptance by God. So Jesus is taken into the wilderness where He is tempted with the sort of things we are tempted with. He is tempted with the most basic need of a human body—tempted to doubt God's provision for Him by using magic to turn stones into bread. He is tempted to promote Himself before men by diving from the highest pinnacle of the Temple, forcing God to save Him from falling to His death. He is tempted to be seduced by the headiness of power and to install himself as the world's king. But in each case, Jesus succeeds where Adam and Eve failed. Jesus did not give into the lust of the flesh, the lust of pride, or the lust to rule over others.

In fact, Jesus was the first and only man in history to be tempted by all the things by which we are tempted and not sin. He was altogether holy, altogether worthy, altogether obedient to His Heavenly Father and to the Holy Spirit. Even Pontius Pilate washed his hands and proclaimed that he could find nothing in Jesus for which He could be condemned.

The central truth about us is that we are sinners, subject to all manner of transgressions against God, against ourselves, and against our fellow human beings. The truth about Jesus is that He is pure and wholly without sin. The truth about God's passion for us is found where Jesus' holiness meets our sinfulness. On the cross, God makes the great exchange. He takes our sinfulness and all the pain, suffering and shame that sinfulness deserves, and He places it on Jesus, His Beloved Son. And, then God takes the righteousness of Jesus, with all the blessings, reward and honor that righteousness deserves, and He makes that available to us. God's love and passion for you and me is that strong. And, it's all grace, the gift of God. We don't deserve it and we can't earn it, but we have it if we will but receive it.

In Romans 5:18-19, Paul puts the truth of the gospel into these words: *“just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”*

Now the question for today is this: are we willing to take part in the great exchange God offers us? Will we allow Jesus to take our sins to Calvary? Will we allow God to impart to us the righteousness of Jesus? If our answer to these questions is yes, there are several things we need to do. We need to own up to the truth that we are sinners. Then we need to put our full trust in Christ as the complete sacrifice for our sins. Third, we need to ask the Lord to send the Holy Spirit into our hearts to make us new men and new women who through the power of the Spirit are able to live Christlike lives. Finally, we need to live into these new lives day by day, keeping our old lives behind us and Christ before us. In Revelation 22:17 it says, *“The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And . . . let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.”*

If anyone is thirsty for a new beginning this morning, here it is. Take some ashes to acknowledge that you are a sinner. Pray, and tell the Lord that you want in on His bargain—to exchange your sin for the righteousness of Christ. Ask for the Holy Spirit to empower you for the new life to which He calls you. Exit this house this morning to live as a son or daughter of God.

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Sermon for March 5, 2017

Our Truth; His Passion

**Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7,
Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11**

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Our Truth; His Passion

At the risk of being politically incorrect and gender insensitive, I have a confession to make to you this morning. I don't like girly sandwiches. Cream cheese and cherries belong in desserts not in sandwiches.

But I have a more serious confession to make than that: On Ash Wednesday, when one is supposed to be denying oneself, I didn't. When the sandwiches at the Wehnwood UMC Lenten Luncheon were passed out, the tray of sandwiches was handed first to me because I was sitting in the seat closest to the aisle. And, when I received the tray of sandwiches I noticed that there were ham salad sandwiches on top of the pile and cherry colored girly ones underneath.