

*With honesty and humility.* A sermon preached on Lent 1, February 14, 2016 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons: JOEL 2:12-19

MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-21

This Wednesday past began the season of the church year known as Lent – from the Anglo Saxon words *lencten* – *spring and lenctentid* – *spring time*.

It is the 40 day count down to Easter that the church historic has traditionally used as a time to reflect on what it means to all people for all time to say 'Jesus died for my sins

Unlike the season of Advent,  
Lent is usually a quieter, more contemplative time.

This quiet is not meant to be empty. Rather it is quiet to better reflect and ponder on the extent and the depth of God's love for us in Jesus.

So, I believe it is less a season about denying ourselves some tasty treat – though that is a self-discipline most of us could use!

Rather,

I believe Lent can be a gift

For it gives us permission to read again, hear again the portion of Jesus's story known as the passion;

See ourselves in the story – not like a member of a theatre audience;

And ask questions of ourselves – what does this story say to me? About me? About my life? My priorities? The realness of my own love for Jesus and for other people?

What does the story say about our love for ourselves – too much? – where we all become little Narcissus or far too little? – low self-worth.

Lent is not a particularly fun season.

In part owing to the stories and the Bible readings that seem to appear again and again in Lenten worship and preaching.

In part because the stories and teachings around Lent force us to remember and be reminded that we – each of us – are anything but perfect.

That is we are wrong more times than we might care to admit

We make mistakes

We make errors in judgement

We make bad decisions and poor choices.

We screw up!

Yet, how often personal self-righteousness and pride swallows up our need,

Nay our ability, to admit our wrongness and our mistakes

How often do we conclude that our out of jointness in our lives,

Our discontent

And anger at life

Our grumpiness, even our sadness is NOT owing to our actions and our behavior.

Maybe, just maybe, the way we are acting, behaving feeling is NOT THE FAULT OF ANOTHER, OR THEM OR IT!

It is our fault

We are to blame – no question

We made the mistake...

Self-righteousness and pride run rampant is not a side effect of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

A failure to admit wrong,

To accept the blame

To man up begin in the opening chapters of Genesis with Adam and Eve

And the finger pointing exercise over the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Without missing a beat the self-righteousness and blame game follows into the story of Adam and Eve's first children – Cain and Abel

Cain's response to the Lord's question **where is your brother?**

**I do not know: am I my brother's keeper (Gen 4:9)** has been replayed a gazillion times in novels, music, poetry, the arts and in the story of real honest to goodness families has it not?

It may be in different settings, involve different people speaking different words, but

self-righteousness and personal pride is still too much with us!

Left unchecked these two things remain a debilitating and deadly to a vibrant faith in the Lord Jesus.

Without question I believe that to mark a Lenten season in a way any less than to call for a return to a renewed faith in the Lord and his promises is only playing a religious game and worth less than nothing.

HOWEVER, I also believe that Lent was never meant to be the church's justification to rip away all sense of an individual or a community of faith sense of value and self-worth.

All of us fall short of the glory of God --  
ALL OF US

All of us need the forgiveness that can only be offered by God through Jesus.

ALL OF US HAVE AREAS IN OUR LIVES THAT ARE BROKEN.

It may be memories that need healing,  
Relationships that need mending or some degree of resolution – even letting go.

It may be a debilitating habit we know we need to let go – but in our own strength we just cannot seem to do this.

It may be a debilitating habit we refuse to let go because by some bit of warped reasoning, the debilitating habit gives our life purpose

I've met such people – they are the ones who make the lives of all those around them miserable because they themselves are energized by negativism and chaos.

It maybe that our brokenness takes the form of an unforgiving spirit and heart.

We can do one of three things with our brokenness.

We can continue to let it condition our lives now and into the future

Saying that is just the way I am – deal with it!!

Or we can ignore the truth that all of us have areas in our lives that are broken – it is the ostrich head in the sand approach – I don't want to talk about this!!

Or we can take a real radical step and say in the presence of Christ – ENOUGH!

We can face our brokenness, the world's brokenness

Turn that brokenness over to Christ, so that we can be restored by him through his death on the Cross.

Remembering that all of us stand on equal footing before the cross.

And in God's strength and with his help as well as our prayers and the prayers of others to help,

See in a new and fresh way what it means today to live as new creations in Christ

These are not empty words designed only to make us feel good.

These are real promises given to allow us to be the people God wants us to be – ransomed, restored, healed and forgiven!!

So, echoing the words of this morning's opening hymn,

*Come let us to the Lord our God  
With contrite hearts return  
Our God is gracious, nor will leave  
The desolate to mourn*

We begin the journey of Lent 2016 here at St. Giles.

To begin dealing with and seeking healing from the brokenness in our lives is dependent upon many things.

This morning's readings from Joel and Matthew remind us of only two

But they are two things that are foundational in living today as new creatures in Christ

Consider first, Matthew

Matthew begins chapter 6 with the word  
 “BEWARE”

We all know that means to take note,  
 exercise caution, and be careful.

Beware – high voltage

Beware – falling ice

Beware – sharp curve ahead

Beware – low shoulder

Beware – construction ahead

Beware – guard dog on premises

When we had a house rabbit, I so wanted to put a  
 sign in our front window that read “Beware  
attack rabbit on premises!!!”

**Beware of practicing your piety before others in  
 order to be seen by them**

Then Jesus cites three examples of a very public  
 strut your stuff spirituality being led by the  
 scribes and Pharisees

These are nothing less than behaviours to impress  
 observers with grandiose expressions of piety.

In this morning’s reading – giving of  
 alms – financial giving, the practice of public  
 prayer, and times of fasting.

We do not know if the Pharisees and scribes  
 behaved as badly as Jesus said they did,  
 But there is no way we can say, I don’t see about  
 what Jesus is talking?

To follow says Jesus does not mean grand-standing and looking good.

It is not about drawing attention to you, show and dazzle

Rather it is *about just doing the stuff I am showing you how to do – without looking for praise and adulation!!*

It is about *being honest – not putting on airs!*

*Being the person you are,*

*Not aping someone else because you do not think you are good enough.*

*Or saying and doing things out of the character you really are.*

Over the years, I have observed the same sort of behaviors shown by the scribes and Pharisees here in Matthew – in both colleagues and in members of a congregation

The people I can see in memory were and are not intrinsically bad or evil people.

They just have real issues being honest and upfront about whom they really are!

So they put on a mask called the ‘CHRISTIAN PERSONALITY’

Their voices become quieter and more guarded

They no longer laugh – they titter

They pretend that their lives are perfect or nearly so.

Family – no problems here

Job – love my job, my boss, going to work every day!

Worries, fears and anxieties – that is what others have – not me

Struggle with doubts, beliefs about God – not me

Hating God sometimes for something that has happened in their lives or in the lives of someone they love – no never them – because that is not the way Christians are supposed to act.

What would God say if I said I doubted Him or was really ticked at him?

Depressed, addicted to substances, pornography, or have an eating disorder – no – not I.

The Christian Personality mask is firmly in place!!

*The call for honesty all the time – particularly in the spiritual life is HARD*

Hard because we think that by being honest we are letting God and the faith down

Hard because we think that to admit weakness, or error or humanity for goodness sake – this will only be met by judgmental attitudes, shaming, guilt, humiliation and belittling

I really do understand – for it is no secret that the human institution of the church still at times does a good job at shooting the wounded. That is not right – you and I both know it is not right.

But it still happens, with the result that the Christian personality mask stays on the souls of many.

If we really want to deal positively with those areas of our life where brokenness is evident, we need I believe to remember some things:

- *God's love for you is greater than anything you could do or have done and see as a screw up or failure in your life.*
- ***All have fallen short of the glory of God.** Great displays of public piety that do not acknowledge this are banal and vacuous. Such displays do not erase that truth- **All have fallen short of the glory of God.***
- *Each of us in our own way need to work toward cultivating a nonjudgmental attitude toward all others. We need for example to continue to intentionally and prayerfully work at making the community of faith – this or any other a place where people feel safe to freely express themselves and be themselves – without eye rollies, harrumphs and finger pointing judgement.*

Honesty will flourish in such a climate of non-judgmental attitudes and in time the CHRISTIAN PERSONALITY MASKS will come off.

Joel calls the people to *humility*.

He calls them to remember who God is and what  
He has done for you

He calls them to remember that none of us is at  
the centre – only God is.

Here in chapter 2, Joes speaks about what shall  
happen if the people do **“return to the Lord”**

In other sections of his book, Joel tells the people  
with equal clarity what shall happen if they do  
NOT return to the Lord.

I do not suspect it has ever been easy to  
practice humility as the scriptures call us to do  
Humility after all shares the same root word in  
English as humiliation

There to practice humility, to be a humble person  
Is often viewed as a position of weakness  
Of being taken advantage of,  
Of being mousey and excuse me for living  
Of losing out on something  
Of deprecating one’s self image and self-worth  
Of being a bit flaccid and weak

And humility often means that we have to  
admit we were wrong and apologize – that is  
certainly not the prevalent way of the world.

However,

Consider to whom God’s people – you and me –  
are asked to live in a way that shows humility.  
Not some tyrannical dictator  
Not some jump start little weasel

No we are as God's people being asked to live a life of humility before Almighty God  
 We are being asked to be humble before HIM – to make God, not ourselves the centre.

And that, good people is not a position of weakness and humiliation  
 RATHER it is a position of assurance, hope and purpose.

In what ways?

Humble before God people know they are not ultimately in charge;

They know all things do not ultimately depend upon them

They can therefore release to God what only God can resolve or fix

Humble before God people know the reassuring words of WHAT A FRIEND WE HAVE IN JESUS ARE NOT JUST NICE AND PLEASANT

Vs 3

*Are we weak and heavy laden,  
 Cumbered with a load of care?  
 Precious Saviour, still our refuge  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer  
 Do they friends despise, forsake thee?  
 Take it to the Lord in prayer,  
 In his arms he'll take and shield thee;  
 Thou wilt find a solace there.*

Humble before God people are *more readily able to cultivate an attitude of thankfulness* – for they are more sensitive to the lavish generosity of God in daily life.

Self-centered people will miss seeing God's lavish generosity because they are too preoccupied with maintaining their status as numero uno.

Humble before God people are *more eager and confident to see and experience the wonder and awe all around them.*

Humble before God people know *God is here and he is not silent.*

#### HONESTY AND HUMILITY.

Foundational to our own work to seek God's help in healing, mending, repairing the broken areas of our lives.

Neither behavior will come easily, but then few things that have lasting value and importance are easy.

But, one cannot begin the practices any sooner can we?