

“Lenten Discipline” - Texts for the Season

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If the words “Lenten Discipline” mean anything at all to you, my guess is that they trigger an awareness of an uncomfortable *lack* of discipline, whether in your own life or in the life of the church generally. Dietrich Bonhoeffer focused this awareness for the previous generation with his sharp distinction between “cheap” and “costly” grace. If the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ make the radical difference we Christians claim, shouldn’t it make a far more radical difference in the lives of Christians than it typically does? Isn’t it the point of the Lenten season to reflect on the difference between the people we are and the people we are called to be, to repent, and to seek grace for more faithful discipleship? Isn’t this the time to anticipate Good Friday and examine our life together under the blinding glare of the cross of Jesus Christ?

If you are not already in this frame of mind, the first text appointed for the 1993 Lenten season in the Common Lectionary is apparently designed to get you there. Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7 thrusts upon us God’s first explicit claim upon our obedience to God’s will and God’s way in the world, followed immediately by our perverse choice of what seems to us to be a preferable alternative. Throughout the better part of three millenia, this ancient story has lost none of its power to diagnose the character of our alienation from God, and therefore from each other.

Curiously enough, the first symptom of this alienation, according to Gen. 3:7, is not a specific sense of guilt for having disobeyed God’s command. Rather, each human partner is overcome with unaccountable shame in the presence of the other’s naked body. The hastily stitched fig leaves do nothing to eradicate the shame, of course. At best they provide a cover-up for the mistakenly identified cause of the shameful feelings. Shame itself remains lively, as verse 8 makes clear, when the first pair hears “the sound of the Lord walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” They simply repeat the hopeless pattern of trying to deal with fear and shame by hiding.

It may be instructive that the first words of the Lord heard in this newly alienated world are “Where are you?” not “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself!” Apparently the Lord assigns no great value to shame as a tool for human improvement. As far as we can tell from Gen. 3, shame produces nothing but the frantic effort to cover it up.

Throughout history, most human communities have taken a more optimistic view of the uses of shame than the Lord apparently does in this story. We soon learned that almost every human being experiences shame in one form or another: the excruciating sense of being unacceptable in relation to other people. We discovered that such feelings can be stimulated in a variety of ways, making people all the more frantic to discover techniques for making shameful feelings go away. People who organize societies, or rear children, or serve as pastors of churches, have always known how to capitalize on this phenomenon. The first move is to identify the cause of the shameful feelings in patterns of behavior regarded as unacceptable. Next you prescribe means by which the shameful feelings may be overcome. Ordinarily this involves adopting patterns of behavior acceptable to society, or parents, or pastors, respectively. Shame is thus elevated to the status of a kind of preliminary virtue, a necessary prelude to inventive measures of reform. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine

how one could organize society, or rear children, or serve as pastors of churches without at least occasional judicious application of the shame/reformation technique.

Yet Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7 raises preliminary questions for me about “spiritual formation” and the usual motives for undertaking, for example, a special Lenten discipline. Has the church relied too heavily on shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest (all attested in Gen. 3) to spur us on toward spiritual renewal? When these motives dominate, it seems to me, the result is typically no better than fig leaf underwear, a temporary and highly unsatisfactory solution to a complex problem.

With that question in mind, let’s take a closer look at the texts appointed for the first Sunday in Lent, 1993. We have already seen that Gen. 2:15-17, 3:1-7 leaves the first pair in a shameful state. Yet their quasi-comical effort to improve their lot, in response to inchoate feelings of shame, does nothing to heal the huge brokenness into which they have fallen. Shame emerges in the story as the symptom of an alienation they can neither properly understand nor deal with. Indeed, the human experiment might have ended with a whimper at Gen. 3:7, except for the Lord who keeps the story going. In Gen. 3:8ff., the Lord’s startling appearance in the garden produces a fresh panic of shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest. These in turn produce efforts at concealment, finger pointing, and buck-passing, none of which offers any hope for the human future. The balance of the biblical story makes it plain that the sole hope of alienated people lies with the One who asks “Where are you?”, that is, with the Lord who will not give up the quest for authentic mutual relationship, who refuses to let this shame/guilt, this fear, this self-interest have the last word about us. Reflection about Lenten discipline and the motives appropriate to it may well begin with wide-eyed, openmouthed, slack-jawed wonder in the presence of such grace.

On the face of it, Psalm 32 appears to focus our attention on the possibility that honest confession of our failure to be God’s kind of people offers a blessed solution to the problem of shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest. Yet I find clues in Psalm 32 that the human virtue of “honest confession” (good for the soul?) is not the center of attention here. Verses 1 and 2 are surely to be understood as a doxology in praise of God, who is able to restore relationship with people who have irretrievably forfeited any right to it. Verse 10 concludes the Psalm with the curious imperative to gladness and rejoicing, not because of our capacity to restore wholeness by our confession, but because of God’s capacity to make wholeness our possibility. Motivations of shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest may indeed steer us, against our wills, to move in unaccustomed directions. These new directions may even have the appearance of something like improved piety or “spiritual renewal.” But isn’t this rather like the forced behavior satirized so acidly in v. 9 (cf. Col. 2:16-23!)? Isn’t the focus of Psalm 32 more nearly on the praise of God whose forgiveness makes our honest confession possible, than on the “discipline” of confession as a technique for improving the quality of our relationship with God?

Romans 5:12-19 offers no hope whatever that the offspring of Eve and Adam can deliver themselves from this deadly climate of shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest by means of any conceivable human “discipline.” On the contrary, this text invites us to celebrate the wholly free and wholly gracious gift of God in Jesus Christ, who does for us what we cannot possibly do for ourselves. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once noted, there is a certain advantage in celebrating Easter while you are in prison. You become entirely aware that the prison door can only be opened from the outside. Like a red tricycle under the Christmas tree, the matchless gift of new life in Christ can only be celebrated by the “discipline” of receiving it with joy, of climbing aboard and giving

it a try.

We have not understood the temptation scene in Matthew 4:1-11, I think, until we perceive it as the ultimate encounter between a human being and the entire range of temptations that seduce us away from the love of God and neighbor. In this one vivid episode, the Gospel of Matthew makes the same startling claim about Jesus Christ that the Epistle to the Hebrews makes: that he is “one who *in every respect* has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

On the face of it, this is disconcerting news about the rest of us. The absolute faithfulness of Jesus, under the most exquisite temptation imaginable, unmasks the petty concessions and compromises we make routinely, when temptations to faithlessness are incomparably less acute. Yet the implication of Matt. 4:1-11 is that the faithfulness required of Jesus is no greater than the faithfulness God requires of each of us.

If you are already given to feelings of shame/guilt, fear, and self-interest, Matt. 4:1-11 should serve nicely to intensify them. Yet the whole of Matthew’s gospel suggests that the story of the temptation of Jesus was never intended to focus attention on our faithlessness. Neither was it intended to produce grim resolve on our part to duplicate the spiritual heroism of Jesus. From the perspective of Matthew 27 and 28 it ultimately becomes clear that everything Jesus says and does is said and done on behalf of people who have *failed* to love God and neighbor as Jesus does.

Backlighted from the perspective of cross and Easter, Matt. 4:1-11 breaks open a startlingly *new* way of dealing with our chronic inability or unwillingness to counter temptation with faithfulness. What we are manifestly incapable of doing on our own, Jesus has done with us, and for us, as one of us, at the cost of life itself. The implication of Easter is that, while we can never duplicate the faithfulness of Jesus out of our own moral and spiritual resources, we can *participate* in the faithful life of Jesus as God’s matchless gift to us. By the power of God’s spirit we really can “put on” the new life in Christ, regardless of how our past record may read (see Col. 3:12-17; cf. Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27; Eph. 4:24). This is not a quality of life we can *generate*, not even by the sternest and most demanding of spiritual disciplines. No amount of shame/guilt, or fear, or self-interest can motivate us toward it. But, by the sheer grace of God, we really can participate in the Resurrection life of Jesus Christ (See Rom. 5:17), “whom God made our righteousness” (I Cor. 1:30). The only motives appropriate for that enterprise are the motives of Easter gladness, the motives of faith, hope, and love.

A cursory glance at the remaining texts appointed for the Lenten season in 1993 discloses these same motivational themes. Neither our past faithlessness nor our resolve to do better take center stage in these texts. The emphasis lies rather on God’s irrevocable promise (Gen. 12:1-4a; Rom. 4:1-5, 13-17), God’s trustworthiness (Ps. 121), and the new life in Christ which is God’s gift to sinners (John 3:1-17). Exodus 7:1-17 remembers a time when we put *God* to the test, yet God “passed the test” by refusing to let our testiness defeat God’s will for our life together. Psalm 95 suggests that the only response appropriate to such a God is a hymn of praise to the God who holds us accountable, and yet who counts us as “the people of God’s pasture, and the sheep of God’s hand.” Even now God makes it possible for us to “hearken to God’s voice,” and not to “harden our hearts” as we have done in the past, with all the deadly consequences of such behavior. Romans 5:1-11 places this wonder at the very heart of Christian existence with the astonishing affirmation of v. 8: while we were still guilt-ridden, fearful, self-centered rebels against God, Christ died for us!

The story of the Samaritan woman in John 4 demonstrates how this amazing

grace becomes real in the life of a triple outsider: a woman, a Samaritan, a sinner. Alienation, deception, and suspicion give way to contagious recognition that “this is indeed the Savior of the world” (v. 42). The “discipline” appropriate to such a discovery is rather like reaching out for a cup of endlessly refreshing water when you are dying of thirst (vv. 13-15)!

I Sam. 16:1-13 raises the fascinating question of just what it is the Lord sees in David’s heart. Verse 12 makes the curious point that David’s external appearance is well above average, but does God see the deadly self-indulgence in David’s heart that will one day lead him to cover up an act of adultery with an act of murder (II Sam. 11)? The kingdom of God is not to be built on David’s faithfulness to God but on God’s faithfulness to David, in sheer defiance of what God sees in David’s heart and ours. David comes closest to fulfilling his vocation as the Lord’s anointed in the times of brokenness and failure when he places his past, his present, and his future entirely in God’s hands (see esp. II Sam. 15:13-31). There is no serious reason to suppose that Psalm 23 was composed by David, but no psalm is more “Davidic” in its expression of radical trust in the God who is in this thing with us, at indescribable depth, constantly doing on our behalf what we cannot possibly do for ourselves. And *so on*!

A grotesque parable drawn from John 11:44 may illustrate the fundamental character of Lenten discipline as I perceive it in all these texts. Lazarus has been raised from the dead by Jesus, who *is* “the resurrection and the Life” (v. 25). Nowhere in any of these Lenten texts is it quite as explicit as here that the life God *wants* for us is the life God alone can *give* us, through an absolutely shocking gift of grace. Yet poor Lazarus lumbers out of the tomb still wrapped head to toe in the cumbersome paraphernalia of a corpse!

I’m not certain the author of John intended for us to hear this detail as a parable of Christian existence. Yet once the thought has entered your mind it is very difficult to drive away. How like us it is to have received the shocking gift of life in Christ and yet to stagger about like zombies, still bound hand and foot by the shrouds of the deadly existence from which Christ has set us free (Rom. 7:24, 25a; cf. Rom 6:2)!

Having risked this parabolic thought, perhaps we can hear the command of Jesus in v. 44 as an imperative to the community of faith: “Unbind him, and let him go!” We have no capacity to raise each other from the dead, something God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. But by the grace of God and at the command of Christ, we really can help each other wriggle out of these confounded grave clothes that hold us back from full expression of our new life in Christ.

If so, the first step in any Lenten discipline is to confront again, as if for the first time, just how good the “good news” of God is, not only about us but also about the world. Studying these lectionary texts together might make a good beginning, in conjunction with listening to five sharp sermons based on some of them. It will take a resurrection miracle to produce life from the dry bones of a community like ours (Ezek. 37:1-14!), but these texts point in a variety of ways to the resurrection miracle that stands at the heart of the gospel.

The parable we have derived from John 11:44 suggests that Lenten discipline is not well conceived as a private affair. The Good News of God is always for *us*, never only for *me*. Even if you sense new life stirring in your own veins, you may require the assistance of equally wonderstruck friends to help strip away the grave clothes, and vice versa. We *need* each other if the love and justice and peace of God are to come alive in our life together. *Shared* faith, *shared* hope, *shared* love—these are the

realities that keep the people of God lively, by the power of God's spirit working in us. And it goes without saying, doesn't it, that a community resurrected and animated by the spirit of Christ never exists for its own sake, but always on behalf of God's beloved outsiders. For that reason, Lenten discipline will involve fresh exploration into ways of extending hope to hopeless people around us.

The possibilities for such Lenten disciplines are endlessly varied, but motivation toward them will always be wonder, gratitude, and joy. The watermarks will be faith, hope, and love grounded in what God has done, is doing now, and will yet do for God's beloved world.