

March 1, 2020
The First Sunday in Lent, Year A
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7
Psalm 32
Romans 5:12-19
Matthew 4:1-11

Maybe you remember some of the talk over the years about “scared straight” juvenile crime prevention programs. Remember, this wasn’t about being scared out of homosexuality—though such programs do exist—but rather about being scared out of a life of crime. There was a lot of buzz over the award-winning 1978 documentary film *Scared Straight!*, which Wikipedia describes this way: “Filmed at Rahway State Prison, a group of inmates known as the ‘lifers’ berate, scream at, and terrify the young offenders in an attempt to ‘scare them straight’ (hence the film’s title), so that those teenagers will avoid prison life.”¹

That model has claimed an ongoing place in our public life and imagination. For example, from 2011 to 2015 the A&E network aired a reality show called “Beyond Scared Straight.” But if you think it’s a good idea, you might want to think again. As one writer summarizes it:

There is only one problem: Scared Straight programs don't work. Actually, it's worse than that: They do more harm than good. Several well-designed studies have been conducted, in which at-risk youth were randomly assigned to take part in Scared Straight programs or to a control group that did not, and then all the kids were followed to see whether they got into trouble. These studies found that the kids who took part in the scared straight programs were subsequently *more* likely to engage in criminal activity by 1 to 30 percent, with an average increase of 13 percent.²

That article was published in 2012 in *Psychology Today*. The author was responding to a letter to Dear Abby from a father asking whether he should send his wayward daughter to a scared straight program.

The Christianities of my childhood and youth often felt to me like “scared straight” programs. Somewhat sadly, my memories consist largely of adult religious leaders trying to frighten people into their version of a sin-free life with threats of a horrible eternal damnation. I don’t know what the statistics say in this situation, but it didn’t work with me and may even have had the opposite effect. Those Christianities still exist. I now espouse a different Christian perspective on sin, redemption, and the afterlife. That’s Good News that I am obliged to share with the hordes of people who yearn for it. I’ll save redemption and the afterlife for future sermons and today focus on sin.

You’ve probably heard of Ashes to Go—or at least I hope you have, since we offered them here on Wednesday. Episcopalians around the country now offer Ashes to Go, and thereby take at least one ritual of the church beyond the church. With Ashes to Go, we attempt to meet people where they are, in terms of both physical location and life circumstances. Many people who can’t attend church on a weekday still want ashes; some people who would never go into a church still want ashes.

I don't know when Ashes to Go started, but it must have been around ten or twelve years ago. Just three years ago, another trend emerged: Glitter Ashes. This is exactly what it sounds like: you take the usual Ash Wednesday ashes and mix in some glitter—purple suggested but rainbow mix acceptable. The Glitter Ashes “official” website makes the case for why they're important, with comments like these:

Glitter is like love. It's irresistible and irrepressible.

Ashes are a statement that death and suffering are real.

Glitter is a sign of our hope, which does not despair.

Glitter signals our promise to repent, to show up, to witness, to work.

Glitter never gives up -- and neither do we.

And perhaps more to the point:

Glitter Ashes lets the world know that we are progressive, queer-positive Christians. We are in the pews, in the pulpits and giving glitter ashes in the street to those who either may not have time to go to a church—or may have been rejected by a church.

The public face of Christianity is often a face of intolerance -- especially toward LGBTQia people. There are millions of Christians who believe that the Gospel commands us to love, not hate. Glitter ashes are a witness to an inclusive Christian message.³

Glitter Ashes were offered to go last week at Michigan State University. They were imposed not with “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return,” but rather with “Remember that you are love, and to love you shall return.”⁴

I'm gay, but I'm not quite comfortable with Glitter Ashes. I wonder whether they dilute the whole point of Ash Wednesday. Still, I understand the impulse. Ash Wednesday is a complex prospect for many people, especially people the church has singled out as intrinsically or especially sinful. This includes gay people and a whole lot of other people. But talking about gay people helps us talk about others. And so I'll say that gay people are sinful—not because we're gay, but because we're human, and every human has done things of which they ought to repent. Being gay is not in itself one of them. On the other hand, the church ought to repent for the way it has treated gay people. In this and more, the church itself has been the sinner. That is what keeps a lot of people away. I don't believe the church has taken seriously the need for its own repentance.

But let's back up a bit. Today is of course the first Sunday in Lent. Lent lasts 40 days, not counting Sundays. Every Sunday is a day of resurrection and therefore a feast day, so Lent is “suspended” on Sundays. That's so, and still we do things differently on the Sundays in Lent. For example, we began our service today with the Great Litany; for the next four weeks we will begin the service with what is called the “Penitential Order for Lent,” which puts the confession right up front. Feast or not, during Lent penitence comes front and center.

Sundays in Lent are feast days, but it's worth considering the nature of the feast. What a person considers a feast depends very much on the non-feast space that person normally occupies. A poor person's feast might very well be a wealthy person's famine. I think that's one reason why talking about sin is so hard. So much of sin is really about power, privilege, and control.

Last week I started our Lenten book read, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove's *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*. I hope you read it, too. I won't really get into it now, but I will make two related observations. First, the Bible is being still being used to create animus toward marginalized people, including gay people and women and people of color and poor people. Second, scripture has long been used for human intrigues associated with power, privilege, and control.

For a case in point, we can go right to the beginning of the Bible and today's reading from Genesis. I have a visceral reaction of irritation any time that reading shows up, and it does show up: in the recounting of salvation history, this is "the fall" from which Jesus saved us. Today it's paired with the temptation of Jesus; this infers that Eve is not only tempter but also Satan prototype who leads Adam and all *mankind* down the path to perdition. Responsibility for the breaking of sin into the world gets pinned on Eve, and therefore on women throughout all time, who have been subjugated because of it. Like it or not, this is one of the most important stories in the Bible, if measured by impact throughout history. Therefore, it's worth struggling with.

Genesis, while "scripture," is not a historical record; it's an origin myth much like other origin myths. I imagine humans in every culture evolving to the point of being able to observe their own lives and ask *Why?* In our myth, the tree from which Eve and then Adam eat illicitly is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The truth here is that humans have the *capacity* to tell good from evil, and this has proven to be a terrible burden, one made even more complex because every individual is both sinner and sinned-against. I read Genesis and suppose that God is less angry than sad. I imagine God grieving for us and with us. For me, that's enough to explain Jesus.

Lent isn't about being scared straight. But Lent is the season of taking sin seriously. Those of us who have been harmed by the language of sin might be tempted to avoid the language of sin altogether. But that's probably not the best approach. Last month, a short essay by Sara Misgen, our friend and Yale PhD student, was published in a new online magazine called *Earth & Altar*. I commend to you both the magazine in general and her article in particular. In it, Sara says this:

I am unabashedly for the doctrine of sin. Part of this is aesthetic.... Part of this is also academic.... But the vast majority of the reasons that I advocate a robust doctrine of sin have to do with the way it allows me to speak honestly about the world and the condition in which I live.

Sin is about naming correctly what is right and what is wrong with the world. Because of this, it is essential for Christian faith. To call something sinful is to say two things at once: first, that something is not part of God's ideal and desire for the world, and second, that we need God's help in overcoming it.⁵

During Lent, maybe our task is at heart to consider how we can share the feast with those who have been left with famine. The language of sin gives us a powerful way to do this, especially if we allow those subject to famine define the terms. In the process, we acknowledge our own sin even as we claim the agency to name the sins of others and call to account the sinful institutional structures that support them. With God’s help, we will edge toward setting those things straight—not in fear, but in love.

Notes

¹ “*Scared Straight!*,” Wikipedia, available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scared_Straight! (accessed March 1, 2020).

² Timothy D. Wilson, “Scared Crooked: Do Scared Straight Programs Work?,” *Psychology Today*, March 28, 2012, available online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/redirect/201203/scared-crooked> (accessed March 1, 2020).

³ “Glitter + Ash Wednesday,” from the website of Parity, available at <https://parity.nyc/glitter-ash-wednesday2020> (accessed March 1, 2020).

⁴ Emily Bevard, “‘Remember That You Are Loved’: ‘Glitter Ash Wednesday’ Supports LGBTQ Community,” *The State News*, February 28, 2020, available online at <https://statenews.com/article/2020/02/glitter-ash-wednesday-to-support-lgbtq-community> (accessed March 1, 2020).

⁵ Sara Misgen, “Saying ‘No’ to Bad Things: On Naming Sin Rightly,” *Earth & Altar*, January 13, 2020, available online at <https://earthandaltarmag.com/posts/saying-no-to-bad-things-on-naming-sin-rightly> (accessed March 1, 2020).