

Ash Wednesday
March 6, 2019
The Rev. Devon Anderson

Few theological concepts are as mangled and misinterpreted as the concept of sin. Many of us, including myself, accrued, perhaps, the less-than-helpful notion of sin in childhood or adolescence, being taught that sin involves moral wrongdoings one commits personally, often having to do with sex or what we consume. As adults, many of us have come to believe – building on those early messages -- that being a good Christian is about achieving a kind of moral purity, that can only be arrived at by ridding ourselves of sin. Lent, then, becomes the season of self-evaluation, deprivation, and taking stock of our many failings and failures. For many of us, this message about sin and the Christian life and Lent are engrained down deep inside of us.

But centuries of thoughtful Christian theology, and the experience of the earliest Gospel writers, point us in a different direction, a direction we hope to explore during this Lenten season at Trinity. A moralistic take on sin would have us believe that our wrongdoings are, themselves, the disease – the thing from which we need curing, saving, pardoning. But an earlier tradition around sin claims that our wrongdoings are not disease in of themselves, but rather disease of the soul. Simply, when we go astray, our wrongdoings point to something deeper. In the way physical symptoms let us know something is off in the body, moral wrongdoings let us know something is wrong in our souls, serving as a kind of signal or alarm to assist us if we pay attention.

Today I want to offer an idea for us to consider this Lent: maybe sin has to do with separation or disconnection from our true identity. *Maybe sin is not about wrongdoing in itself, but about not knowing who we are* and acting out of that disconnection. Maybe sin has to do with being unconscious to the fact that, as our Gospels promise us, we are united with God – every second of every day -- imbued with God, and one with the ground of all being. When we do not understand these truths or allow them to direct our actions, we operate out of ego and self-protection. And ego and self-protection cause us to make missteps and bad decisions. But if we focus only on our wrongdoings, then we miss the point entirely. It's what is underneath those wrongdoings that's the point – our not being connected with our true selves.

If you've been around Trinity these past months, if you've attended an Adult Forum, or read the bulletin, or listened to the sermons, or participated in the Enneagram workshop then you'll know – there's been a lot of talk around here about the "True self" and the "False self" and the place of that dichotomy in the spiritual life. And we have Anne and members of the Adult Faith Formation Team to thank for that – as they have chosen a path for us as a parish to go deeper, to ask the hard questions, and provided an ongoing opportunity for each of us to intensify our spiritual lives and further develop our own discipleship, if we so choose.

What we mean by "True self" and "False self" is described in Richard Rohr's book, "Immortal Diamond: The Search for the True Self," which the Adult Faith Formation Team is offering this year as a Lenten read. (Just an advertisement: see Anne and you can pick up a copy for \$20). As the idea goes, there is, within each of us, Two Selves: a True Self, and a False Self – and these Two Selves are

reflected all over our scripture and throughout our theological tradition. The False Self can be understood as our small self, or our ego. The True Self might be called our soul, or our essence, or, as Thomas Merton coined it, our immortal diamond. “At the center point of our being,” wrote Merton, “is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point of spark which belongs entirely to God.” This is the True Self. The True Self is who you are in God, and who God is in you. The True Self is what makes you, you. By contrast the False Self is the identity we create for ourselves, not so much bad or even false, just passing, ultimately un-sturdy, persistently dissatisfied and fragile, and what cannot, ultimately, bring us life. Spiritual practice, then, becomes about digging down, clearing away, finding, claiming, and learning how to be and act out of our True Selves. Similarly, spiritual practice is learning about, and coming to terms with, our False Selves, our ego – *which isn't the enemy*, by the way – just that part of ourselves that, if unknown, not understood, or kept in its proper place, tends to overcome us, and lead us to make reactive or egotistical decisions and choices.

No offense to old Richard Rohr, but this idea of the False Self and the True Self is not new or novel. In fact, it goes back to the very earliest beginnings of the Christian church. By the end of the second century, Christianity had formed itself into an institution: consisting of a canon of scripture, an apostolic creed, and a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons who understood themselves to be the guardians of the only “true faith.” But before the time Christianity drew lines around its practice and structure, the term “Christianity” included an astonishing and radically differing array of religious beliefs and practices, among them that of the “Gnostics,” from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning *knowledge*, or *insight*. To the Gnostics, *gnosis* involved an intuitive process of knowing oneself. And to know oneself, they claimed, is to know human nature and human destiny. At its deepest level, they claimed, *to know oneself is simultaneously to know God*. The Gnostics, like other Gospel writers, gathered stories about Jesus, and recorded his parables and sayings and teachings into their own books like the Gospels of Thomas and Mary. While the Gnostic Gospels didn't make the ultimate cut or the final, like so many other Gospel collections circulating in the first century, it's enough to know, for this season of Lent, that the pursuit of True and False Self-awareness is as old as Christianity, dating back to Jesus himself, and his followers that recorded his teaching. Someday it would be a thrill to together dig into the Gnostic Gospels and learn their interpretation of Jesus' life and message. But that's for another time, and another Lent.

As for us, on the brink of this Lent, we will do well to submerge ourselves into the scripture that will present itself to us this season. Everywhere we look, the scriptures will lead us to deeper understanding of claiming our True Selves. “Return to me with all your heart,” the prophet Joel will tell us. “Create and make in us new hearts.” We'll hear the stories of our spiritual forebears living out of their False Selves and then coming back to their True Selves – like Moses with the Burning Bush, and the Prodigal Son coming home. Jesus will tell us parables about hope and possibility, cloaked in metaphors like a fig tree and an anxious vineyard owner who cuts it down because his expectations don't match God's reality. We'll hear about Abraham learning the hard way of the meaning of righteousness – the ability to meet God in the center part of his being. And we'll watch Jesus realign Judas who, acting out of ego and competition, criticizes Martha for anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume.

Today we begin the journey down into ourselves, on a quest to discover the diamond within, and there, with luck, to meet God anew. As always, you can participate to whatever degree you wish. We begin

the journey with ashes and confessions, with scripture and then with soup. We start with this day. Because “this is the day/we freely say/we are scorched,” writes the poet Jan Richardson.

This is the hour
we are marked
by what has made it
through the burning.

This is the moment
we ask for the blessing
that lives within
the ancient ashes,
that makes its home
inside the soil of
this sacred earth.

So let us be marked
not for sorrow.
And let us be marked
not for shame.

Let us be marked
not for false humility
or for thinking
we are less
than we are

but for claiming
what God can do
within the dust,
within the dirt,
within the stuff
of which the world
is made
and the stars that blaze
in our bones
and the galaxies that spiral
inside the smudge
we bear.

AMEN.

Sources:

Christian Century, blog post dated February 19, 2019, by Tricia Gates Brown, “Sin is About Not Knowing Who We Are.”

The Gnostic Gospels, Elaine Pagels, pp. xiii – xxiv.

A Book of Blessings for the Seasons, Jan Richardson, “Blessing the Dust.’

Immortal Diamond, Richard Rohr, pp. 2-5, 15-21.