

Sunday, February 25, 2007
Given by the Rev. M. Peter Harer

Lent 1C

As you probably have noticed, I am not a big fan of sin. What I mean is, I don't make a very big deal out of sin in my sermons. I don't dwell on sin as though it were the most important doctrine of the church. Instead, I tend to view sin like the crazy aunt in the attic. I know she is there; I know she can raise cane at times; but I don't dwell on her as though nothing else matters.

I suppose part of this is because growing up in a little rural Methodist Church, I got a big enough dose of sin and its consequences to last a life time, or several life times. I sat through numerous sermons that painted a picture of us human beings as the vilest creatures that ever walked the face of the earth. Very often, the three letter word sin was uttered in the same breath with another three letter word that begins with "s" and ends in "x". If you need help figuring out what that is, speak to me afterwards.

Rarely, if ever though, did my childhood ministers use the word sin and, say, racism in the same sentence; or sin and the nuclear arms race; or sin and the degradation of the environment. For most, if not all of the well intentioned Methodist ministers I listened to as a child and young person, sin was strictly personal. It strictly involved the things *I* do; the thoughts *I* think; the things *I* say, and not the things *we* do; the thoughts *we* think or the

things *we* say as a group or society. As the scriptures clearly tell us, sin isn't simply personal, nor is it primarily about a three letter word beginning with "s" and ending in "x". Instead, sin is a condition of human beings that affects all levels of human interaction, from the way I interact with you, to the way we as a nation or society interact with other nations and societies.

I recently came across what I think is a much more useful definition of sin by Frederick Buechner, a writer and Presbyterian minister. He describes sin this way: "*Wie man's macht, ist's falsch* [which] is a crude German saying which means, freely translated, *whatever men do, it turns out lousy*. The Russians throw out the Tsars and end up with Stalin. The Americans free the slaves so they can move out into the ghettos...."

As we do every year, we begin our Lenten journey with the story about Jesus' encounter in the wilderness with the human side of his person. The gospel writer uses a much more colorful description of Jesus' encounter. He says that Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness. If you want to believe that Jesus encounters a real person called the devil or Satan in the wilderness, that's fine by me. The point is that Jesus comes face to face with the reality of what all of us face on a day to day, if not minute by minute basis. He faces the stark choice as to whether he will choose his own path, or the path that God wills for him. It is probably no accident that the three

paths that confront Jesus in the wilderness are perhaps universal to what most, if not all, of us human beings really want, if we are truly honest. They are wealth, power and fame. If only we have these, we think, we'll have it made.

I understand that this evening, some sort of awards ceremony is to take place in Hollywood. What is it called? The "Academy Awards" or something like that? If you want to understand what Jesus encounters in the wilderness, plunk him down in the middle of the academy awards ceremony; better yet, plunk the academy awards ceremony down in the middle of the Judean wilderness with Jesus. The Academy Awards has it all: The thirst, even the lust, for wealth, power and fame. It's all right there on the TV screen. Who needs the Judean desert after all?

I don't want to seem too harsh on those actors and actresses who give us endless hours of sometimes great, but usually mediocre entertainment. They have simply acquired what the rest of us secretly want: wealth, power and fame. Speaking for myself, though, I would settle for wealth. But at the risk of picking on our favorite movie stars, do you see the contrast between where Jesus is and where the rest of us, especially our movies stars are? This difference between us and Jesus is that Jesus turned his back on it all.

It is dangerous, perhaps even blasphemous to try to psychoanalyze Jesus. Yet I can't imagine that throughout history, there ever lived a more talented, gifted, creative, and visionary figure than Jesus. Imagine what Jesus could have accomplished had he wanted to start a business, run for president, write a series of best selling novels, or work his way to the top of the church hierarchy. I doubt that anyone could have stood in his way. Yet what did Jesus do? He turned his back on it all. "Get behind me, Satan," he said. Talk about tough acts to follow!

So, is it sinful to want to start a business, run for president, write a series of best selling novels, or work one's way to the top of the church hierarchy? For Jesus, it probably was. God had other things in mind for him. But for us? I don't think so. Yet if this story of Jesus' forty days of agonizing choices in the wilderness tells us anything, it tells us to look carefully at our motives for everything we do. I suppose that even includes preachers who write sermons. Do we do it strictly for our own personal glory and the praise of others? Or do we do it first of all for the glory of God, and the benefit it brings to others? Frequently, it is a combination of both. It's a fine line, isn't it?

I believe that those Methodist ministers of my childhood sought the glory of God first before anything else. But if they were honest, they no

doubt recognized that their somewhat obsessive focus on personal sin was probably their way of fending off the demon of sin in their own lives. Most of them succeeded at that; unfortunately a few didn't.

You don't hear me dwell on sin very much. My personal preference is to dwell on God's love, mercy and goodness toward us. Yet, like the crazy aunt in the attic, we need to be reminded that sin is never far away. It is real; it does raise its ugly head from time to time; and it all too frequently causes whatever we do to turn out lousy. That's the bad news today. The good news is that Jesus has come to heal the crazy aunt in the attic; Jesus takes old Satan by the scruff of the neck and tosses him over his shoulder as a gesture of contempt for everything but what God wills for his life, for your life and for mine.