

Homily – Stepping in Good Luck

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How many of you have heard the term “stepping in good luck?”

Back around 1970 my grandparents retired from a suburb of New York City to a 160-acre farm in upstate New York. Many of the farms around them were dairy farms and often the neighbors would use my grandparent's fields for their cows. This is where I learned the term “stepping in good luck.” When you are in the fields or in the barns you are almost always going to be around cow poop, also known as cow paddies. Do I have your attention now. And, because there is so much cow manure around one frequently steps in it, and you get it on your shoes or boots. And, at some point some wise person decided to rename the cow poop, good luck so that each day you are stepping in good luck. How is that for putting a positive spin on it? Does it make you want to be on a dairy farm so that you can have more good luck?

Now, one could look at this as a marketing ploy. Advertisers are well known for shifting the way we think about a product. The people at Heinz Foods were using green cheaper tomatoes which resulted in thicker catsup, and instead of using more expensive tomatoes they convinced us that thick catsup was what we wanted. So, one could look at the good luck as a marketing ploy. However, I would rather look at it as an optimist. Instead of seeing the glass being half empty, we can see it as half full. There is a lot to be said about looking at things from the bright side. It may be true that it is a luxury to be able to be an optimist, but I am going to stick with it. And on the bright side, when on a farm with cows or on a ranch with horses we have the opportunity to step in good luck. So if we can change our thinking about manure, can we also change our thinking about sin?

This past Wednesday we began our annual observance of the season of Lent, a time of preparation as we work our way in about forty days to Holy Week and Easter. Sin and repentance, or turning away from sin, are two of our traditional topics of this season. All four of this morning's Scripture readings are about sin. Our Old Testament reading is about eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After eating from the tree, Adam and Eve saw themselves as separate from God and this is pointed at as the basis of all of our sin. Our reading from the Psalms calls us to be penitent and turn away from sin. In today's New Testament reading we hear Paul talk about Jesus as the second Adam as he helps us overcome sin. And, finally in our Gospel readings we have the three temptations of Jesus which mirror some of the same sins that we face each day.

Now, maybe I should digress for just a moment to define sin. In the classic sense, sin means to miss the mark. An archer aims at a target but misses. This is sin – missing the target. And, in the ancient Hebrew tradition, the Ten Commandments and the other six hundred, or so, laws of the Old Testament told you where to aim your life. Every time you broke one of the six hundred laws, you missed the mark and you sinned.

Then two thousand years ago, Jesus came along and raised the bar on sin. Or more accurately, he changed the game entirely on sin. Jesus taught us that anything that separated us from God is sin. Furthermore, Jesus reframed sin in the language of love. God is always and eternally present with each and every one of us. There is nothing that we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. God loves each and every one of us equally and unconditionally. And, God loves those who have wronged us just as much as those who have done good to us. God loves.

However, we do many things during our day and in our lives that keep us from seeing the love of God. Jesus lets us know that sin is anything that keeps us from being aware of the love of God. And, sin is anything that keeps us from responding to God's love. Sin gets in the way of our love of others and self. Sin keeps us from reflecting God's love back out into the world.

Now, we are a church that does not talk about sin very much. "In many congregations, the only sins openly announced from the pulpit are low attendance, poor stewardship, and the biggest sin, failure to volunteer" in the thrift shop.

Twenty-first century Americans do not like to be reminded of our sins, and if we have to talk about sin, it should be about the sins of those other people. In addition, we are more comfortable talking about our communal sins. You know, those sins that we have in society like racism, sexism, homophobia, and violence. We are very uncomfortable talking about personal sins, yet I think we all recognize that we are doing things in every hour if not every minute of our day that separate us from God and keep us from reflecting back out the love of God into the world.

In her book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", Annie Dillard shares the following story about sin.

"Once upon a time an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village.

"I want to ask you something," the hunter said.

“What’s that?” the missionary said.

“If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to hell?”

“No.” the missionary said, “not if you did not know.”

“Then why,” asked the hunter, “did you tell me?”

Most of us think that if don’t talk about or think about the topic of personal sin, then we have less of it. We mistakenly think that if we avoid the topic of sin then we will be more like Jesus. However, sin breeds when it is hidden, and it diminishes in the light of day and with attention. Anyone who has ever been through Alcoholics Anonymous or any other twelve-step program will tell you how important it is to be mindful of, acknowledge, and take responsibility for personal sins. Awareness breeds healing. So let’s not just ignore our wrongs.

However, the opposite, focusing on the sin too much, is also a problem. One well-known Protestant reformer, from a few hundred years ago, actually spoke of “total depravity” to characterize the human situation. And, another reformer spoke of human nature as “a pile of manure covered with the snow of Christ.” I’m not sure that person had heard about stepping in good luck. All joking aside, this negative view of human nature can be unhelpful, for it is a view that denies our inherent God-given human dignity. And this view has negative consequences. Grace can only build on—and perfect—nature; it cannot undo it. We must start to think about our human nature where the Bible begins in Genesis 1 where we read “It was good, it was good, it was very good.”

And when we start from the beginning the first image in the Judeo-Christian Bible reveals a creative, compassionate God: “God’s Spirit hovered over the water.” The word “hovered” is the same word used to describe a brood hen, lovingly watching over her young, warming the eggs and protecting the hatchlings. The Bible begins with clear hints of growth, development, and evolution. God is a dynamic creator, a verb more than a noun. Then we get to the part of the story that has the six days of creation. At the end of each day, God saw that it was good” five times and “found it very good” after the sixth day. This is good news, for we all need to know that this wonderful thing called life is going somewhere and according to the beginning of the Bible, it is going somewhere good. It is going someplace good because it came from goodness. We need to remember that Creation and humanity began from “original blessing” instead of “original sin.”

For some reason, most Christian theology seems to start with today’s Old Testament reading, Genesis 3—which features the problems faced by Adam and Eve as they saw

themselves separated from God. Centuries after Jesus Augustine of Hippo would give Genesis 3 the title “original sin.” Unfortunately, when you start with the negative or with a problem, it’s not surprising that you end with Armageddon and Apocalypse. When you start with a punitive, critical, exclusionary God, it’s not surprising that you see the crucifixion as “substitutionary atonement” where Jesus takes the punishment that this angry God intended for us.

However when we start with the original blessing that is found at the beginning of the Bible, it flips our understanding of human nature and shifts our appreciation of Jesus. Jesus did not come to change the mind of God about humanity. It didn't need changing. God has organically, inherently loved what God created from the moment God created it. Instead, Jesus came to change the mind of humanity about God. And, as our image of God changes, our image of God’s creation, including ourselves, changes as well. Jesus shows us what it looks like for God to be incarnate in humanity. Jesus holds together the human and the divine so that we might follow him and do the same.

Underneath the layers of muck that our lived lives have encased around us, underneath it all, is your True Self. Your True Self is who you are objectively from the beginning. It is who you are in the mind and heart of God. It is who you were before you did anything right or wrong. It is your substantial self, your absolute identity, which you can be neither gained nor lost by any technique, group, affiliation, morality, or formula. Instead, the surrendering of our false self, which we have usually taking for absolute identity, is the necessary suffering to find the pearl of great price and the immortal diamond that is always hidden inside us.

So let’s flip the narrative on both manure and sin. When on the farm or ranch may you step in good luck. And during this time of Lent may we acknowledge and turn away from our sin by first recognizing the original blessing we have from God. When you look in the mirror or look around the room at others, may you see the beauty that God has built into all of us.