

1 Lent Year B
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Episcopal Church at Yale
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Only Connect

Genesis 9: 8-17; 1 Peter 3: 18-22; Mark 1: 9-15

Come quickly Holy Spirit, to help us who are assaulted by many temptations; and, as you know the weaknesses of each of us, let each one find you mighty to save. Amen.

While we're gathered here tonight, my wife Cherise is just finishing up a master class, becoming a mindfulness meditation instructor. It's part of what she teaches pediatric residents and interns: not only the latest science, but the latest discoveries of the heart, so they can become true healers. She identifies as a BuChrist – a Buddhist Christian – a scholar and practitioner of both traditions.

A central theme of her teaching, like our theological understanding of the Trinity, is that just as people are an integrated system of physical, emotional, and spiritual elements, in the same way, any idea of separation *between* people is simply an illusion, that the very basis of human existence is interconnectedness and interdependence – with God, with each other, and with the earth.

Make no mistake, this is a profoundly counter-cultural view, challenging as it does much of conventional theology, the narrow intellectual tradition of the Western Enlightenment, and the deep-seated American cultural icon (or should I say idol) of rugged individualism. It's countercultural, at least for many of us who grew up with a Western Europe cultural background.

But Jesus, in the slipstream of what we call the wisdom tradition, focused his entire ministry on trying to connect the people who had been discarded by the powerful as useless, less than, or other. Jesus knew the corrosive power of “othering,” whether perpetrated by a Roman emperor, a vassal Chief Priest, or a slave owning landlord, so he lived, suffered and died, one for all.

Sadly, for all that Christianity has offered humanity, our great tragedy is that we have also been an institution that has thrived by “othering,” whether through anti-Semitism, virulent racism, the slaughter of indigenous peoples and eradication of cultures, the persecution of LGBTQ+ sisters and brothers, or the degradation of women. We have much to repent for this Lent... and every Lent.

And this Lent, we could begin by considering Jesus' truth that we are all “one body,” all part of one another, all with need of one another, and that “othering” has no part to play in God's kindom.

We announced this week that anyone who comes to ECY can get a free Bible, Hymnal and Book of Common Prayer just by asking. And one reason to ask is so you can check out the catechism on p. 845 of what we call the “BCP.” It's filled with priceless pearls of wisdom, questions like What is sin? Answer? *“Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.”*

If you're looking for an answer to the question "Why Lent?" there you've got it in a nutshell: when we forget who we are, and who God is, our life starts going straight downhill.

Sin feeds our voracious egos with the fruits of evil rather than feeding our hearts and spirits with the bread of life. I don't know how each of you names the presence of sin or evil in the world, whether it's terms of pitchforks and little red tails, or some shadowy Jungian internal force. What's important is that we all wake up to the reality of sin all around us, and its' devastating impact on individuals, species, and indeed, on our planet.

When we consider our human inclination to self and mutual harm, to alienate ourselves from God, each other, and our environment, the common theme in all these sins is "othering," raising ourselves up on the backs of our neighbors.

I see it as much at Yale as the rest of the world: the ridicule we heap on those who differ politically from us; the stinginess of our forgiveness when someone offends us; the spread of "othering" as we tell our friends how horrible that person is; the covenant we make to exclude them from our community. We seem to yearn for some perfect oasis in which everyone thinks and behaves the same way we do, and simply discard "others" who speak or act differently.

I hate to disappoint, but that's not the way the world is outside of the Yale bubble. Real communities are messy and uncomfortable and absolutely *require* diverse perspectives to keep them moving forward towards reconciliation and justice. They are more like the Last Supper, with everyone vying to sit next to Jesus, as he passes the first piece of bread to Judas, who will soon betray him... all interconnected in the great drama of salvation.

Those are the *only* communities in which we can learn how to let go of all the goodies our egos love – like judgement, or moral superiority... and discover real love. The hard way, by working at it with respect, kindness and compassion, day in and day out.

Consenting to evil, especially when we "other" one of God's beloved, is all about denying our interconnectedness. Like each of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness: toward power, which requires someone else be powerless; toward wealth, which requires that someone else be poorer; toward adulation and success, in which standing on pedestals requires others to stand in the dirt. It's because we succumb to these temptations that we *need to* "other" people, in order to justify and feel better about ourselves.

This Lent, Jesus calls us to simplify our lives and not overthink salvation. Love God with everything you've got; and love your neighbor (which means everyone else) even as much as we adore ourselves. And whenever we fall, which we all do – repeatedly – instead of "othering" ourselves or someone else, just get up and start again. Happy Lent!

For our breakout groups, let's share who we are at greatest risk of "othering" in our lives, and how we can make a different choice.