

“Am I Enough? Through God’s Grace I am Enough” by Michele Frome

March 5, 2017



First Sunday of Lent

Today is the first Sunday in Lent, the season leading up to Easter when we are invited to engage in self-examination and repentance. This morning, I am going to share some of my self-examination with you.

If you go to a Speakers Meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, you’ll probably hear two recovering alcoholics speak for 20-30 minutes each, telling the story of their life. Their assignment is to tell us “what it was like, what happened, and what it’s like now.” Often, it seems to me that they spend 90% of their time talking about their active alcoholism – the “what is was like” part – & only about 10% on their recovery.

In my impatience, I get frustrated that they spend most of their time on the Problem, rather than the Solution.

I really like today's scripture readings, because they give us both the Problem and the Solution. The first passage, which we didn't hear read this morning, is part of the Adam and Eve story from Genesis. It clearly lays out The Problem: God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of knowledge, the snake tempts them to eat it, they give in to temptation and eat the forbidden fruit, and humankind is thrust into a world of sin and evil, toil and pain.

Why did they do it – why did they eat that fruit In the words of one biblical translation, the snake told them that once they ate the fruit:

“you'll see what's really going on. You'll be just like God, knowing everything, ranging all the way from good to evil.” They ate the fruit, then, because they wanted to be like God.

I often recognize in myself an attempt or a desire to be like God – to know everything, to do everything, to fix everything, to be perfect. When I stop and think about it, I can see that most of my sins boil down to trying to be God, forgetting what is God's job and what's my responsibility.

In Psalm 32, which Muriel read for us this morning, we hear about The Solution. The Psalm says: When I confess my sin and acknowledge that it was wrong, I am forgiven by God – God actually takes away the guilt of the sin.

But that's not the end of the story in the Psalm. What happens next? God protects me from trouble, and teaches me how to live. If I try to go it alone, it won't be pleasant – I'll feel like a horse being restrained by a harness. But if I trust where God is leading me, and I choose to align my will with God's will, it'll be great – in the words of the Psalm, I'll be “surrounded with unfailing love.” I'll rejoice!

Now, let's fast forward a few hundred years: In today's

Gospel reading, Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus is repeatedly tempted by the devil, but does not sin. At this point, it's a little hard for me to relate to Jesus – he's supposed to be human, but he doesn't give in to temptation; instead, he remains perfect, without sin. Not like me. Me, I keep trying to be perfect, trying to fix everyone's problem, trying to get everything done, trying to succeed at everything– and what happens? I don't succeed very often. But I keep trying – trying to do it right, to do more, to do it all, to get it perfect.

Most of you know that my father died this past autumn, at the age of 96. He was an environmental activist and a freelance writer. Years ago, I learned that my father was constitutionally incapable of NOT writing. I can't tell you how many times he said, "this'll be my last book", and it never was. You may think that was great — he was mentally active until a week before he died. But I always saw it as unhealthy. I viewed my father as a workaholic. I confess: I am, in many ways, like my father.

I know this. Here I am – I'm studying to become a chaplain, I'm in two mission groups, I've joined the Children's Team, I'm helping seniors with their income taxes – and every day I actually come up with more ideas of things I can take on!

But why? What drives me to do more?

Is it something I WANT to do, or something I feel I HAVE to do?

Am I doing it because it brings me JOY, or because I'm seeking SELF-ESTEEM?

Is it a response to GOD'S CALL, or is it coming from a place of EGO and INADEQUACY?

Is it SERVICE, or is it SELF-CENTERED FEAR?

Those are hard questions to answer, but important ones...really important ones if I am committed to seeking knowledge of God's will for me & the power to carry it out – or, to put it

another way, if I am committed to following God's Call.

Why do I do it? I'm afraid I don't have the definitive answer to this question – alas, this is not a perfect sermon. But here's what I do know:

I need to examine my motives in every instance.. What I realize, when I do this, is that often I am feeling inadequate. What I feel is described well by one of the lines read earlier in our Confession. I want to read that line again now, this time substituting the pronoun "I" instead of "we":

I live most of the time in a state of perpetual discontent, striving to be who I am not, uncomfortable with who I am."

This is where my clinical pastoral education has challenged me. As most of you know, I have received financial support from the Growing Edge Fund of Seeker's Church to enroll in clinical pastoral education – basically, on-the-job training to become a chaplain, a person who provides pastoral care to individuals in need.

In my last training unit, I read a book entitled, *The Art of Listening in a Healing Way*, by James E. Miller. It's a wonderful little book – each chapter is just one page of text, accompanied by a black and white photograph and a few quotes. The title of one chapter hit me right between the eyes when I first read it, and it has remained in my consciousness ever since. It reads,

"Healing listeners trust they are enough."

"You will not always feel ready when you're called upon to be a listener... You may wonder if your wisdom or experience is adequate...Should that happen, say this to yourself: 'I am enough'... You can trust that whatever has happened in your life so far has helped you prepare for this particular encounter."

"I am enough." That sounded good, but what did it have to do with being a chaplain, I asked myself. The answer, I realized, was this: When I DON'T trust that I am enough, I'm

striving to accomplish more; hence, I'm focused on myself. When I DO trust that I am enough, I can be fully present with the other person, and I can become fully open as a channel from God to others. When I trust that I am enough, I can be my most genuine self, without self-centered fear.

In my last mid-term evaluation, one of the questions I had to answer was, "What have I learned about myself and my relationship with God?" To my surprise, what came out of me onto the computer screen was a poem, a poem about myself as a chaplain. I'd like to share it with you now:

I am not God.

I am a servant of God –

Sometimes, I know what God wants me to do.

I am a tool for God –

Occasionally, I know when God has used me.

I am a channel for God –

once in a while, I feel God passing through me.

I am a mirror for God –

In some rare cases, I know I've helped another to see God.

I am far from perfect.

I am not God.

I am enough.

"I am enough." For me, that's what Paul is talking about in the passage from his letter to the Romans that Marjory read for us this morning. Paul is comparing the impact of Adam and Eve's original sin with the impact of God's gift of Jesus Christ. While Adam and Eve's sin led to death for all, Jesus's sinlessness leads to "justification and life for all." For all – even me.

"Justification" is the word used in many biblical translations, but I'm not really sure just what it means. But The Inclusive Bible uses these words: "the free gift of Jesus Christ ...brought complete acquittal." "Acquittal" – that means I'm found to be innocent, 'not guilty.' I'm not a lawyer, but what I've picked up from lawyer shows on

television is that if I'm acquitted, I can't be tried again. In Psalm 32 God takes away our guilt, but here it is as if Jesus takes away the sin itself.

I like the wording used in the New Living Translation of the Bible even more. It says that "God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins."

Being right with God – that's The Solution! And it is nothing I need to do, or learn, or achieve. The solution comes through God's grace – and it comes not in spite of my imperfection, but because of my imperfection. If we were not imperfect, God would not have needed to give the gift of Jesus Christ.

So, if you ever think I'm trying to do too much, you may remind me of what I've said this morning by simply asking, "Michele, are you enough?" You can remind me of God's grace.

Yes, God is with us. Amen. First Sunday of Lent