

## The Language of Lent: Awareness

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Fourth Sunday in Lent  
March 6, 2016

“But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.” -- Psalm 19:12

I suspect that for many of us, the answer to the question that opens my text this morning -- “But who can detect their errors?” -- is “I can.” I can detect my errors. I can spot my misdeeds. I can recognize my sins.

I may not like them. I may not be proud of them. I may not want others to know about them. But I can tell when I've gone off the rails and am behaving badly.

That's the way many of us think about ourselves, I imagine, because that's the way I thought about myself for many years. If I behaved badly – did something I knew I wasn't supposed to do – I knew it at the time, and, moreover, I knew why I did it. Someone had hurt me. I lashed out in fear or pain. Resentment had built up over time.

Whatever – the cause really didn't matter so much as whether I could see it and recognize it for what it was. Those errors I could detect easily, if not happily, and the moral universe still made sense to me.

But then, about twenty or so years ago, I started behaving badly and I didn't know why. I became a terrible housemate – moody, withdrawn, snappish – and my two housemates wanted less and less to do with me, and for good reason. I had become an unpleasant person, someone neither they nor I nor anyone else really wanted to be around. I was difficult, I was unpredictable, I was erratic. And even though I knew I was behaving badly, I couldn't figure out why. My housemates had done nothing wrong. My health was fine. My grades were perfectly satisfactory. I was making adequate progress through my graduate studies. There was no external cause that I or anyone else could spot for my nastiness, and it was over the backyard grill on Memorial Day that a friend of mine, an Episcopal priest, told me it was time for me to seek professional help, and I did.

And I commend such professional help to all of you. We Midwesterners tend to be stubbornly self-sufficient, even when it comes to our mental health – perhaps especially when it comes to our mental health – and I was, at the time, the quintessential Midwesterner: If I have a problem, I'll fix it, even if it's inside of me.

A moment's reflection, of course, would have told me how foolish such an attitude is. There are lots of problems, inside and outside of us, that we cannot fix on our own. It would never occur to me, for example, to try to take out my own tonsils, even if I knew that my chronic tonsillitis meant that they needed to go.

But when it comes to our feelings and behavior – and, specifically, why we do what we do – many of us become entrenched do-it-yourselfers. We don't seek help. We don't want to admit that we need help. If we're feeling bad, we just need to pull ourselves out of it. Snap out of it, we tell people. Get over it. Pull yourself together. Be an adult.

If I've heard that sort of advice once, from decent and well-meaning people, I've heard it a hundred times. We think we know ourselves well enough to diagnose our problems, especially our emotional, psychological, mental, and spiritual problems, and fix them.

But Psalm 19 indicates otherwise. Psalm 19 says that we have hidden faults that lie beyond the reach of our knowledge and intervention. Psalm 19 gives us a prayer for forgiveness and spiritual healing for those faults that we don't recognize: "Clear me from hidden faults."

It didn't take Sigmund Freud to tell us that there is much in our emotional and psychological lives that lie beyond our consciousness. Spouses have been doing this to and for each other for generations. It goes like this:

"There you go again."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

And so on. In exchanges like this, someone's either lying – they know they're doing something that they're denying – or, as Psalm 19 suggests, they're not aware that they're doing it again, and in my experience the latter is more often the case.

We're often not aware of what we do or why we do it – psychologists tell us that it has a great deal to do with psychological and emotional self-defense mechanisms that we repeat until they become unconscious habits – but one of the things our Christian tradition tells us is that we're not victims even of ourselves. We're not victims of those impulses, needs, and desires that lie beneath the surface of our consciousness. With work, prayer, and patience we can begin to detect more of that great submerged iceberg part of our souls and begin to make more constructive use of it.

This coming Wednesday, we'll be looking at two spiritual practices that have proven helpful to many people across the ages who have decided that they no longer want to be victims of their own submerged psyches. Those spiritual practices are the examination of conscience and the examination of consciousness. I don't have time this morning to explain them in detail to you, but Marjorie Thompson does a very good job of explaining what they are, how to undertake them, and how you might benefit from them in her book, *Soul Feast*, which I commend to all of you.

In brief, to examine one's conscience is to take an honest and unhurried look at one's behavior – deeds, words, thoughts, feelings, and the things one should have done and did not – with the goal of assessing their conformity to or deviation from God's will. One of Christianity's great spiritual teachers, St. Ignatius of Loyola, recommended examining one's conscience at the end of every day, to take stock of whether one had devoted that day and all its contents to furthering God's realm on earth or whether one had squandered that opportunity or even impeded the advancement of God's realm.

The purpose of this examination of conscience is to become aware of those things that, in the course of a busy day, may have zoomed past our awareness at the time – the snide remark, the thoughtless comment, the overlooked opportunity, the discreet snub.

Most of us are not aware of those behaviors that have become patterns for us that are subtly and sometimes not so subtly hurtful to ourselves and others. Many of us are quick to speak and slow to listen. We rush to form negative judgments even if we keep those judgments to ourselves. We generally see ourselves as victims long before we recognize how we victimize others.

The daily examination of conscience is an attempt to try to bring these kinds of overlooked sins – those "hidden faults" that Psalm 19 speaks of – to our conscious awareness so that we can begin to amend our ways. This practice takes time, patience, and prayer – especially a prayer for the grace to see ourselves as God sees us, as sinners greatly loved and redeemed at a great price.

The second spiritual practice that helps us become more aware of ourselves is the

examination of consciousness, which is less specifically focused on what we've done right or wrong over the course of a given day and more on how and where we see God at work in our own lives and in the world around us.

Where do we see grace? Where do we see mercy? Where do we see love? Where do we see peace? And how have we responded to those glimpses of God at work in the world?

The Christian life is not a spectator sport. We're not meant to go through life cheerily saying, "Isn't that nice!" We're meant to dig into life, with all its agonies and ecstasies, to continue being co-creators with God.

But we can't do much of that creative work in oblivion. We have to become aware of what's going on around us and within us. It's not an either-or situation, it's a both-and situation, with the focus being on us, because what's inside of us will determine, to a very great extent, what we become aware of outside of us.

It's hard, for example, for successful people to become aware of how a system that worked for them may not work for others – in fact, may work against others. The haves believe they got theirs through hard work and taking advantage of the opportunities our system affords, and that the have-nots simply aren't doing those things. What the haves fail to take into account is the way the system works in their favor and the many pieces of luck and good fortune that helped them on their way, which are often not available to the have-nots. When you're born on the wrong side of the tracks, you're already headed in the direction of becoming a have-not even before you've earned your first dollar.

There's nothing wrong with success, of course, so becoming aware of our success isn't part of the examination of conscience, but it is a matter of the examination of consciousness. Our success – how we got it, what we do to hang on to it, and to the extent we help others achieve it – is very much a part of who we are, and if we're not aware of it, we have little hope of allowing God to use us – including our success – for the ministry of reconciliation.

Lent, friends, is a season of reflection, and one of the purposes of that reflection is to help us become more aware of who we are, who God wants us to be, and what we're doing to respond to or resist that call. The work of grace operates on many levels, and Lent invites us to take the time to go deeper into the working of grace than our hectic lives usually allow. Take advantage of that opportunity; don't waste it and don't overlook it. Grace is waiting for you, and grace is a beautiful thing.