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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 2 Midweek
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, as we continue our Lenten series, today's/tonight's topic is honesty (the inner struggle).

And honesty is that aspect of forgiveness whereby we acknowledge our guilt and shame.

And the need for honesty in the face of guilt and shame stems all the way back to our first ancestors in the Garden of Eden.

We may remember that Adam and Eve, after they disobeyed God and ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, proceeded to make clothing for themselves out of fig leaves.

And furthermore, when they heard the sound of God walking in the garden, Adam and Eve hid from God.

And, we see in those actions the truth about human sin.

How we tend to respond to our guilt and shame is that we hide.

Sin wants to hide.

It does not want to be brought out into the light.

It does not want to be revealed.

That is why Adam and Eve clothed their nakedness.

The act of making clothing is symbolic of covering up their guilt and shame.

They were guilt-ridden, they were ashamed of their sin.

And this is also why Adam and Eve hid from God in the garden.

They were ashamed and burdened with guilt.

PAUSE

Think about television news, when the news is covering the arrest of a man or woman.

That man or woman being led off by police will often try to hide their face.

Why do persons do that? Because they feel the power of guilt and shame, and so they don't want to be known.

Sin wants to hide.

PAUSE

All the more, the word that is the polar opposite of one who is described as "honest" is the word "lying."

He is not being honest. He is lying.

And thus, people who are not honest are called liars.

And what is lying all about, but our effort as human beings to cover things up.

That is all that lying is—it is the act of covering things up with our words.

PAUSE

We see this very clearly in the news surrounding the war in Ukraine.

We know very clearly who is in the right and who is in the wrong with respect to this war.

How? Because Putin is doing all he can to cover up the truth, to hide the truth from his own people.

To be sure, even Putin knows his actions in Ukraine are wrong and downright evil.

If he truly believed he was in the right, there would be no need for him and his officials to lie so blatantly about it.

There would be no reason for Putin to hide, to lie to his own people.

If he truly believed that he was acting in a moral and just way, he would broadcast openly what he has been doing.

But deep down he knows he is wrong, and that is why he spews lies.

And that is how the rest of the world knows Ukraine is in the right.

Yes, sin wants to hide.

If you take nothing else from this sermon, remember this truth.

Sin wants to hide, it thrives in dishonesty.

PAUSE

And it is because sin wants to hide, that it becomes all the more necessary for us to confess our sins.

Confession is part and parcel to honesty.

Confession is the handmaid to forgiveness.

Confession is the equal partner to forgiveness.

In our former green hymnal, the *Lutheran Book of Worship*...

In our former green hymnal, I always thought the most powerful words of the confession were those that said...

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

If we say we have no sin, we lie even to ourselves and to God, and there is no truth, no rightness, no moral compass, no justice, in us.

Again, we can think of these words in light of Putin and Russian propaganda.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

“We are not bombing civilian areas. This is not a war. This is a special military operation. We are in the process of liberating the people of Ukraine. The special operation is going according to plan. The people of Ukraine are welcoming us with open arms.”

Garbage. There is a stronger word I would like to use, but I will refrain from speaking it.

And, to me, this may just be the most unsettling thing about Putin and this conflict—the fact that there is no truth in Putin, no moral compass.

Because where might that lead?

Yes, the psychology or theology, if you will, of this war is interesting to watch, unsettling, but also interesting from a theological perspective.

Sin wants to hide. And furthermore, if we say we have no sin, we deceive even ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

PAUSE

And so then, we come to the words of Lord Jesus Christ.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

And perhaps these are the most challenging words from Jesus in his entire ministry.

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Love Putin and his cronies?

Love Putin who is dropping hundreds of bombs on innocent people, destroying buildings, leveling cities, uprooting lives, displacing millions?

Love Putin and pray for him?

Most of us would much rather spit in his face and be done with him.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” so says Jesus.

PAUSE

Now, to be fair, aside from the blatant lies from Putin and Russian propaganda, there have been some words from the Ukrainian side that have given me pause as well.

President Zelensky has said at one point earlier in the invasion, “We will not forgive. We will not forget. We will punish everyone who committed atrocities in this war. We will find every scum who was shelling our cities, our people, who was shooting the missiles, who was giving orders. You will not have a quiet resting place on this earth—except for a grave. God will not forgive. Not today. Not tomorrow. Never. And instead of forgiveness, there will be judgment.”

Now, certainly, we can appreciate Zelensky's sentiment. If our country was being relentlessly bombed, and we had done nothing to provoke it, would we feel any differently?

Yet, his words, rub up against Jesus's mandate, "Love your enemies and pray for them."

I guess I am bit unsettled by President Zelensky's hubris, so as to speak for God: "God will not forgive."

I guess I am bit unsettled by President Zelensky's hubris, so as to deny even the remote possibility of healing: "We will not forgive. We will not forget."

But again, if we were in his position, would we say any differently?

My concern, though, is where do we find any sense of humility in all of this?

This is not to say that Ukraine should not defend itself.

That is not what I am suggesting.

But for forgiveness, for healing, to be possible, it must incorporate humility, it must entail honesty, in this case, the honesty that is an expression of one's woundedness.

For how can an act of contrition happen from the other without one's honest expression of woundedness?

Pride and hubris tends to discount our woundedness, almost to the point of saying you can't hurt me, I am stronger than your worst treatment.

In other words, the words "We will not forgive. We will not forget," and "God will not forgive," implies a sense of invincibility and can serve to add more fuel to the fire.

Honesty about one's wounds, humility in the face of hubris—again that does not mean one is to put up with harm, but honesty and humility can hopefully at least jump start some process of healing, at least in one's self.

And in addition to confession, then, prayer is a good place, perhaps the best place for that honesty and humility to take root in us.

Prayer helps us to be honest with ourselves.

Prayer helps us to hear our words filtered through the Spirit of God speaking to our spirits.

Prayer is a humbling process, where we recognize that it is more than about my hubris, that it is more about God.

PAUSE

I will conclude then by having us think about the dialogue between Cain and God, which transpires after Cain has risen up and killed his brother Abel.

The dialogue that transpires then between Cain and God is a prayer, is it not?

Talking with God is after all prayer.

And we remember, that in that dialogue, Cain is prideful when asked by God concerning the whereabouts of Abel?

“Am I my brother’s keeper,” Cain arrogantly replies.

And there in his reply is the echo of those words, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

“I have no sin, for am I my brother’s keeper?”

And so then what does God do but confront Cain with the truth of his actions, “Listen! Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground! As a result of this sin, you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.”

And I liken those words no so much to refugees from Ukraine, as to the isolation of Putin, who as the result of his actions in Ukraine, is being made a fugitive, a pariah, by much of the rest of the world.

Cain then experiences a turning point in his life, such that he expresses humility. He says, “My punishment is more than I can bear. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, I shall be hidden from your face, and anyone who meets me may want to kill me.”

I think Putin would likely resonate with those words, which is why he surrounds himself with so much security, “Anyone who meets me may want to kill me.”

But then, God, in his infinite grace, bestows on Cain a mark of protection, so that no one who comes upon him would kill him.

The circumstances then for Cain change because he goes from hubris to humility, because he is confronted by the truth of what he has done.

And all this happens in a dialogue with God, it all happens within the sphere of prayer.

PAUSE

So then, we return to Jesus' words, "Love your enemies, and PRAY for them."

Yes, prayer may not necessarily change our enemies, it may not necessarily bring contrition and forgiveness from the other, but the point is that prayer may in fact change us, may in fact change ourselves, which in turn could change the dynamic of the relationship with the other.

For prayer and confession allow for the power of honesty and humility to work on us, such that we need not ever hide, but may walk boldly in the light of truth.

Thanks be to God. Amen.