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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Lent 1

Sisters and brothers in Christ, 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.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, we would think that in the 21st century a major war in Europe would be all but unthinkable, that a major war in Europe would be a thing of the past.

But, we know that is not the case, as Ukraine and Russia continue to do battle, and continue to increase the number of casualties on both sides.

Indeed the one year anniversary of the start of the war is this Friday, February 24th. (PAUSE)

And we would think that by the year 2023 a country like the United States could get a grip on gun violence, such that we wouldn't have mass shootings over and over and over again.

But, we know that is not the case, as we were shocked by still another mass shooting only recently on the campus of Michigan State University.

Indeed, that shooting on the MSU campus marked the 67th mass shooting already in the year 2023. (PAUSE)

And we would think that by this point in human history, the ugliness of the racial injustice, the ugliness of bigotry and prejudice, the ugliness of racial slurs and of racial intolerance, would be behind us.

But, we know that is not the case.

Unfortunately, the reality of our racist world in which we still live hits home time and again. Recently it hit home for my son.

A few weeks back a student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where my son attends, some student at IUP was caught using racial slurs on SnapChat, and the President of IUP was forced to do quite a bit of damage control.

Yes, we would think that as a human species living how many years since the Age of Enlightenment...

Yes, we would think that human beings with so much history behind us, with all that we have experienced over the many centuries...

Yes, we would think that with all we, as human beings, have witnessed and with all the knowledge we have acquired...

We would think that we would have been able to get beyond war, and mass shootings, and racial injustice, and sin and death, and the devil, so on and so on and so on.

Yes, we would think we would have arrived at a better place, at a more tolerant, more caring, more grace-filled place by this point in human history.

But we haven't.

To be sure, our Prayer of the Day says it all, doesn't it?

Lord God, our strength, the struggle between good and evil rages within and around us.

The struggle between good and evil rages within and around us.

The struggle between good and evil? Ha, I'm not so sure we can even parse out two sides, one good and one evil.

It is not always easy to even get to that point—good vs. evil.

I mean how warped is it that countries in Europe support Ukraine in their war against Russia, even though some of those same countries in Europe are still buying Russian energy, the sales of which are used to fund the war in Ukraine.

We live in a convoluted, messed up world, you and I. And good vs. evil is not so easy to parse out.

And it seems to me that we, as a human species, we have made little if any progress for the better when it comes to getting along with each other.

And sociologists would suggest...sociologists would suggest that the problems of war, of gun violence, of racial injustice, and the like stem from humanity's earliest beginning, stem from the time when our ancient ancestor's first formed themselves into social groups.

During the time when humans were still in their hunter-gatherer stage, we had individuals who formed themselves into separate groups for survival and protection.

There is safety in numbers after all, right?

And thus, the different social groups protected those inside their particular social group, from the other groups.

Anyone outside one's social group was deemed the "enemy."

The enemy was the "other." The enemy was the "stranger."

Those that didn't look like us in our group, those that didn't run with us in our group, those who were not part of us in our group, those persons were considered a threat.

And in that early human existence it was the protocol to kill the enemy first and asked questions later.

And so, we have this "us" versus "them" scenario which has been hardwired into the human species for generations upon generations.

And that mindset, that mentality, that conviction has been hard, if all but impossible to break ever since.

It is hard to get beyond the notion that those who are not "us" are okay.

It has been incredibly hard for the human species to see the stranger, the other as anything but the enemy.

To see the stranger, yes to see the other as one of us—well, we simply are not there. And who knows if we will ever get there, because the opposing thought is so hardwired into human psyche?

The stranger, the other is the enemy.

PAUSE

Now, scientists will talk about all this in terms of the survival of the fittest, right?

That this is part of Darwinism.

That to kill the enemy first and ask questions later is part of the process of natural selection, because it is those who survive that pass along their genes.

...it is those social groups that can outlast the others, whether in the face of opposing social groups, or in the face of disease, famine, and other hardships...

...it is those social groups that can outlast the others, they pass along their genes, and so yes, one might argue that this is just how Darwinism works—survival of the fittest—kill the enemy first and ask questions later, because it is about us versus them.

PAUSE

But theologians will talk about this as the power of sin at play in the world.

Theologians no doubt hearken back to the text we have from Genesis.

That the root cause of war, mass shootings, racial injustice...

That the root cause of seeing the “other” as the “enemy” is nothing short of sin run amok.

PAUSE

Is this then a competition between science and theology? Is this a competition about who is right—science or theology?

Maybe. But maybe it is a little of both. Maybe both Darwinism—survival of the fittest, and sin are happening at the same time.

As a theologian, myself, but as one who highly values the importance of science...

Nevertheless, as a theologian, I can't help but see the power of sin at work in the human species, that the “us versus them” scenario is based on things like exerting power over another, and things like exhibiting fear of the other.

Power and fear—a pretty scary combination when we think about it, is it not?

Sin can do dreadful things when motivated by power and fear.

And even though I can recognize Darwinism for what it is, that it does allow for the passing along of genes with the hope that a species will improve over time.

Nevertheless, the passing along of genes does not account for the violent cycle human beings got themselves into for generations from the origins of those first social groups.

I guess the question is, “Could the passing along of genes for the benefit of the human species have occurred in a more peaceful, civil way, or will it always come down to ‘kill first and ask questions later’ and ‘us versus them’?”

PAUSE

Now, in the realm of science, epigeneticists believe there is hope for the human species.

Epigeneticists believe that we can actually re-program our genes, that we can reprogram our DNA, that we can pass along different traits to our offspring, that in effect we can undo over enough time the hardwiring in us that says the “other” is the “enemy.”

And the science behind epigenetics has been shown to work.

It has been proven that animals can change their genes by their behavior, so as to pass behavioral changes along to their offspring.

Rats, for example, by nature like the smell and taste of strawberries. But scientists have fed lab rats strawberries while at the same time giving them electric shocks.

And you know what, the offspring of those rats who had been shocked, their offspring will avoid strawberries, even though those offspring were never themselves shocked.

The very genes of rats were altered because of the behavioral modification imposed on the parents through electric shocks.

Yes, scientists have shown then that changes in behavior can be passed along, from one generation to the next, at least in rats.

So there is potentially hope for human beings when it comes to the behaviors that had been hardwired in us over generations.

They might be undone.

PAUSE

But, whether we will ever change the human species when it comes to what is now its basic instinct to see the other as the enemy, I am not convinced.

I just don't know if we will ever change our behavior. Why do I say that?

Because every time another war breaks out, every time another mass shooting occurs, every time another act of racial injustice emerges, it sets us back as a human species, because it reinforces the idea of "us versus them." It reinforces the notion that the stranger, the other, is the enemy.

We never seem to get ahead. We never seem to make any headway.

But there is another source of hope other than epigenetics.

Indeed, as people of faith, we see a solution outside ourselves, outside us human beings, who are so tainted by sin.

And that is where God comes in, literally. God comes into our world and God brings the solution.

Lent, we see, is that time in the church year when we think specifically about why Jesus was born those many weeks back at Christmas.

Lent reminds us that God has come into our world, has come in from the outside, to bring the solution, which is the cross.

Lent shows us the solution to the problem of human sin.

PAUSE

Now, I will acknowledge that the "Lenten discipline" has always been a bit of challenge for me personally, because the premise is that our behavior will somehow make us better persons.

I will give up this or that for Lent. I will behave better, do what is better for me, and make myself better.

But what I have found is that my Lenten discipline only reveals my sin all the more.

It gets into what Paul says in Romans 7:14-25—I do not understand my own actions, says Paul. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I

can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Wretched man that I am!

Likewise, I have come to the conclusion that even though I try to follow a Lenten discipline, I fail over and over again.

And so, I believe that the Lenten discipline not about behavior modification, but is truly meant to remind us of only one thing.

That God is abundantly, overwhelmingly, is absolutely, incredibly and all the more generously, I mean GENEROUSLY... gracious.

That is the message of Lent, that is the conclusion we come to when we fail to keep our Lenten discipline, and realize just how much our lives are overcome by sin.

Our Lenten discipline does not reveal this notion that somehow by our behavior we can make ourselves better.

Indeed it does quite the opposite. Our Lenten discipline reveals very depth of our depravity.

Our Lenten discipline reveals how far sin corrupts our very being.

Our Lenten discipline reveals how morally bankrupt we really are.

And how much then we need God's grace.

We think we are doing better, as we journey along doing our Lenten discipline. We think that we are doing better as a human species, that there is some truth to social Darwinism, that good behavior can be passed along, that we can improve as a species by our behaviors.

In Lent, we think we are doing better, giving up this or that, trying to good, trying to stave off temptation.

But it is like a person in front of a light source.

As a person moves closer to a source of light seemingly getting better, improving as one goes, one suddenly realizes that the shadow cast behind one's self only looms larger and larger still as it approaches the light.

That is to say, we see in truth the depth of our sin (the ever broadening shadow behind us), as we get closer to the light of Jesus, we see the absolute depth of our sin all the more.

But that is a good thing after all, as I said, because seeing the profound weight of our sin, makes us appreciate the abundant grace of God in Jesus Christ, who dies for our sin on the cross and forgives us our trespasses, making us then right with God.

So it is then that by the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of his cross, by the grace of Jesus Christ, God forgives us, and so then sees us as his own children.

There is no “us versus them” in God’s eyes. No stranger, no other, who is seen as an enemy. None of that.

No, because of grace, we are all God’s own. Because of grace, we are all part of God’s social group if you will.

And through the lens of grace, through the lens of the cross, hopefully we can see others as our sisters and brothers, and not some stranger we are to fear and so then need to overpower.

Lent, the process of seeing sin and turning outside ourselves for help, not merely trying to modify our behavior ourselves, but seeing ourselves as having been modified by God in his Son Jesus...this process, summed up at the time of Lent, is the means of hope for our world.

This turning outside ourselves for help in Jesus, this is the means of healing for our world.

This is the way wars will come to cease, this is the way mass shootings will end, and this is the way racial justice will be eradicated.

By means of turning from ourselves and turning toward the grace of God in his Son Jesus Christ, who makes us all one by the cross. Thanks be to God. Amen.