

Near Occasions

by Rev. Joe Connolly

“In reply Jesus said, ‘It also says, ‘Do not put God to the test.’” — Luke 4:12

Sometimes you meet someone and you connect with that person immediately and you cannot ever quite understand why you have made that connection. On the other hand and on other occasions you can connect with someone and right away you fully understand that connection.

Back when I lived in New York City and was active in professional theater I made a connection, became a friend with someone, and it was easy to understand why we made an immediate connection. But the real reason we connected was not the obvious one. The obvious connection was theater— she was a dancer and actor, I was a writer. But there were also great differences between us and those differences were quite large.

I was, for instance, from New York City. She was from Omaha, Nebraska. Those are worlds apart.

Interestingly, the real connection was our schools and our schooling. We had both gone to a parochial grade school, a Catholic school, one of us in Omaha, one of us in New York City.

But it was not just that we had both attended a Catholic school. Both schools were staffed by the same order of teaching nuns— Dominicans, the order of Saint Dominic. This is an order well known for its outstanding teachers.

In claiming that having Dominican nuns as teachers was *the* significant connection, let me illustrate that with just one story and I think you’ll see what I mean. In instructing their charges about religion we both heard exactly the same thing concerning sin.

This is what was said: the responsibility of any individual was to try to avoid being a sinner. And how did one avoid being a sinner?

The individual had to keep away from what the nuns called the “near occasions of sin.” Here’s an example and it the one they used. In both Omaha and New York City might add they used the same example! If gambling on horses is a sin— and believe me, the nuns very much thought gambling on horses was a sin— if gambling on horses is a sin then one must never go to a racetrack.

After all, just being at a racetrack puts you physically in a place where the sin of gambling on horses was quite close. And when you are that close to gambling you might be tempted to gamble. A racetrack was, hence, a near occasion of sin. So stay away from racetracks since when you are at one sin sits there waiting to take possession of you.

These nuns had, I think, never spoken to my late grandfather. My grandfather had, himself, never actually been to a racetrack even though he lied about five miles from one. But, illegal though this practice was, he had his own personal bookie, a bookmaker, and he placed bets on the nags regularly.

My point is twofold. One reason my friend and I connected quickly is we had, essentially, the same grade school training, the same grade school experience, despite the fact that the locations where we spent our youth were half a continent away.

My second point has to do with today’s Gospel reading. You probably noticed in this reading Jesus encounters

a bunch of near occasions of sin. So, is this reading about overcoming the near occasions of sin or is it about something else? (Slight pause.)

We hear this in the work commonly called Luke: “In reply Jesus said, ‘It also says, ‘Do not put God to the test.’” (Slight pause.)

Perhaps a good place to start in thinking about this is by asking the obvious question: what is the Biblical definition of sin? The Biblical definition of sin is simple and straightforward.

Sin is breaking covenant. Therefore and hence, sin is anything imperfect. The last time I looked none of us are perfect. (If anyone here is perfect you can leave now.) So, in that sense we are all sinners.

But I want to suggest this reading is not about us nor is it about our transgressions, our sins, whatever they might be. This reading is about God. Therefore, a basic statement needs to be made.

We are not the ones who seek to be in covenant with God. God reaches out to us and seeks to be covenant with us. God is, to use the classic language, the prime mover.

Here’s a different way of saying that. God loves us. God loves us unconditionally no matter where we are at, even no matter what we do.

Therefore, the next obvious question becomes what should we do in response to the fact that God loves us? Indeed, given this is the season known as Lent, some people suggest we should give up something.

It is sometimes suggested we abstain from things. By the way, not fact from things; abstain from things. There’s a difference. Fact is like not eating for a long, long time. Abstain is not doing. O.K.? It’s suggested we should abstain from things, not have them.

Say, for instance, abstain from chocolate or ice cream. I think a lot of people are shaking their heads ‘no’ on that one, right? O.K. So, what we should do? Should we abstain?

I have a list of things from which we might abstain, that has been going around recently. It’s a couple of years old and it is attributed to Pope Francis.

Here it is: abstain from hurting words, words that hurt; say kind words. Abstain from sadness; be filled with gratitude. Abstain from anger; be filled with patience. Abstain from pessimism; be filled with hope. Abstain from worries; trust God.

Abstain from complaints; contemplate simplicity. Abstain from pressures; be prayerful. Abstain from bitterness; be joyful. Abstain from selfishness; be compassionate. Abstain from grudges; be reconciled; abstain from words; be silent, listen. (Slight pause.)

Did you notice this is actually a list of positives, things we can and should do rather than things we should not do, things from which we might really abstain like ice cream and chocolate. I am quite sure each of you could add something else to this list, something you could do.

For me, doing is central in keeping covenant with God. We need to search and find out what can we do to make things better. What can we do to make things better?

We need to find solutions rather than complain about problems. We need to discover what can we do to work toward the fulness of a covenant with God.

And that brings me back to what covenant is about. As I said earlier, “God loves us unconditionally no matter where we are at, even no matter what we do.” (Slight pause.)

On Wednesday last, Ash Wednesday, people and pastors from my church, the United Church of Christ, First Congregational, from Broad Street United Methodist Church, from Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, from Emmanuel Episcopal Church and from the First Baptist Church— five churches— gathered together for an Ash Wednesday Service. Five churches we gathered as one in Christ. Now right there— that’s doing something.

Ashes were imposed. Ashes are not meant to be a symbol of the wrath of God or sorrow, though I am sure some take it that way. Rather ashes are a symbol of our mortality, our frailty, our imperfection.

Hence, they are also a symbol which says we need to do the work of God here, now in our time— doing! The work of God is about doing. The work of God is about the aforementioned kind words, gratitude, patience, hope, trust, simplicity, prayerfulness, joy, compassion, reconciliation, listening.

So perhaps what we need to ask during this season we call Lent is what can we do? Here’s my suggestion. We can strive to be in covenant with God.

The way I see it, being in covenant with God is at one and the same time amazingly easy and dreadfully hard. Being in covenant with God means loving God and loving our neighbor. Covenant— that is very easy to say. Covenant— that is dreadfully hard to do.

And yes, we will never be perfect at the work of covenant. Who is? Perfection is not the point.

Doing the work of God is the point. And if Lent is about anything that’s what it is about: striving to do the work and the will of God, striving to love God and love one another. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I earlier mentioned five churches gathered on Ash Wednesday for a Union Service. In the sermon my colleague the Rev. Dr. David Spiegel said this about our imperfection, our sin, and the response of God. ‘We cannot out-sin God, cannot sin in any amount which exceeds God’s capacity to forgive us, God’s fervor in embracing us, God’s willingness to love us.’ How about that? Our imperfection includes our ability to sin. We are not even perfect at that!”

BENEDICTION: God heals and restores. God grants to us the grace and the talent to witness to the love God has for us. Let us be ready as we go into the world, for we are baptized in the power of the Spirit. And may the peace of Christ, which surpasses understanding, keep our minds and hearts in the companionship and will of the Holy Spirit, this day and forever more. Amen.