

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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I Lent, 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Man, on the first Sunday of Lent we break out all the repentances: we start worship with the Penitential Order, the recitation of the Ten Commandments, and the Confession, all before barreling into the 732 petitions of The Great Litany. We lay it before the Lord, confessing not only *our* faults, but pleading with God to forgive the sins *others* have committed, including those long dead – people we don't know, haven't even met! Though we blame some of this bad behavior on “the crafts and assaults of the devil,” we, nonetheless, acknowledge the temptations and our implied indulgence in everything from “vainglory” to “sinful affections.”

*Good Lord, deliver us,*ⁱ indeed.

In the best of years – when the cosmos and its presumptive keepers assume their ongoing operations on that ramp of uninterrupted progress – praying these litanies can feel overwhelming for us Church people, gathering in a Lenten heap to pray for humankind's wellness, even when humankind fails to recognize that it has taken ill. But in 2020? In 2021? In these years, we've got company, more of the world joining our profession and praying:

From this deadly virus, the physical suffering and emotional grief it has caused, and the isolation it has required.

Good Lord, deliver us.

From the politics of division, their rejection of the common good, and the violence they license.

Good Lord, deliver us.

From the scourge of racism, upon which we built this nation to depend upon the suffering of the many for the privilege of only some.

Good Lord, deliver us.

From the destruction of your creation and our complicity in our own annihilation, as neighbors to our south freeze in their own homes: hungry, thirsty, trapped, with no way out.

Good Lord, deliver us, for these, Christ Jesus, are just the last eight days!

The scope of our sin – personal and shared – feels vast and seems inevitable. Yet, carrying our overwhelm to scripture, the apostle Paul offers us compassion, opening Second Corinthians with a moving account of his own despondency in the face of great difficulty. He writes:

“We do not want you to be unaware ... of the affliction we experienced in [our travels]; for we were so utterly, [so] unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself.”ⁱⁱ

and, as New Testament scholar, David E. Fredrickson translates the verse that follows, “we ourselves, in ourselves, had the sentence of death.”ⁱⁱⁱ That is, Fredrickson reads Paul – wearied by his middling ministry in Asia, exhausted by his pastoral work with the Corinthians – to admit a devastating self-condemnation, including thoughts of suicide: *despairing of life*, Paul sentences himself *to death*.

Yet, from this despair, Paul turns back.

Missy, and I started dating in high school. We married after college, and then returned to Shreveport following seminary. During the two years of my curacy, Missy delivered our first child, Michael Stephens. Having a baby in our shared hometown meant we enjoyed reconnections with many families from our own childhood, often with good-humored warnings of the comeuppance this infant would bring to us.^{iv}

In those days, we would hear other stories, too, sometimes startling confessions to receive from those we had pedestaled as Parents-Who-Knew-What-They-Were-Doing. I remember one such conversation with the mother of a friend. In her late fifties at the time, she admitted that she used to smoke. Though I don’t recall the prompt for her admission, her eyes retreated wistfully as she recalled her strategy for her first morning cigarette. She explained that her bathroom shower had a small window in it, and she kept on its sill a Ziploc bag containing a pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and an ashtray.

“I became an expert at shower smoking,” she explained. “I could bathe and wash my hair without getting my cigarette wet. I felt very accomplished.” We all laughed.

I asked her when she *quit* smoking, and her wistfulness evaporated. She became serious: “My oldest was four,” she recounted gravely. “My first daughter was two, and my youngest was still in the crib. One summer afternoon, I ran out of cigarettes. I could see it coming, and so, with that baby girl on my hip, I checked everywhere – I checked my shower stash, my husband’s coat pockets, my glove compartment – but I had nothing. After lunch, I locked my son in his room, set the two girls down for their naps, and quietly slipped out of the house to run to the grocery. We lived in the country, and the closest store was more than ten minutes away.

“About halfway there, a red light caught me. Feeling agitated and annoyed by the delay, I tapped my fingers on the steering wheel ... when the insanity of my situation finally hit me like thunder: ‘What the hell am I doing?’ I thought to myself. Looking into my rearview mirror, I actually shouted the question at myself: ‘What are you doing?!’ Choking on sobs, I turned the car around, parked in our driveway, and ran back inside the house. I never smoked again.”

As a former smoker, her story of such a dramatic conversion has stayed with me all these years – very much in compassion and admiration, not judgment – that in this moment of utter horror and self-condemnation, she turns her car around. She, like Paul, decides to make a change.

As Paul continues in today's appointment,^v he encourages the Corinthians to turn away from their desperation and to believe in God's power to renew: "We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God ... [and] we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain"^{vi} That is, *Do not receive God's Grace as a vain hope! Believe it!* he urgently appeals.

Continuing, he quotes Isaiah: "At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you."^{vii} Paul then declares, "*now* is [that] acceptable time!" and "*now* is [that] day of salvation!" No matter how overwhelmed you feel, begin renewal where you are, and know that by *your* reconciliation to God in Christ, *you* can transform, too, the lives of those you love ... *you* can make possible the transformation of the whole world. *Believe it!*

Last weekend, my family's cable subscription offered a Presidents'-Day free preview of a lesser-known movie channel. We recorded to our DVR most of its broadcasts during that 72-hour gratis period, accumulating a hodge-podge of forgotten movies from the '70s, '80s, and '90s. During the long weekend, we stayed up later than usual watching a few of these b-films, and my children immediately noticed the smoking: eating at restaurants, *smoking*; working in an office, *smoking*; walking through the mall, *smoking*; all these celebrities *smoking* their brains out.

"It was a different time," I explained.

Of one guy reading the newspaper while drinking a cup of coffee and smoking in bed, an ashtray balanced on his chest: "I mean, *Gross*," my daughter accurately observed. And thanks be to God that she could see what most of us who lived through those days too often failed to recognize.

Yes, some in those days made the personal decision to stop smoking, and, yes, we eventually came to admit the (rather self-evident) danger of "second-hand smoke" ... but we still accepted as a fact of life the cloud of the "Smoking Section" when we ate out ... we, still, did not take as odd – as utter madness! – that a 1969 Cadillac Sedan deVille should feature not one, not two, not three, not four, not five, but *six ashtrays!*^{viii} In one automobile, SIX ASHTRAYS! To quote the young prophet in my house: *I mean, gross*.

Yet, with the benefit of only a single generation,^{ix} we now see clearly that *for centuries* all of us were out of our right minds. Now, we *do* see the madness. The movement took time, and, though some still smoke, the cultural pressure has clearly and consequentially shifted, pushing cigarettes from the center to the margins of our life.^x

Returning to this morning's epistle, Paul pivots from exhorting the Corinthians as individuals, to encouraging them as a whole: "As servants of God *we* have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardship, calamities, beatings imprisonment[s], riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger"^{xi} – *together*, we have faced all this. And we have overcome these horrors by demonstrating to one another "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the [very] power of God."^{xii}

Building on his “body” metaphor, he continues with the encouragement of the community *as a collective*: “righteousness for the right hand and [righteousness] for the left”^{xiii} – not *your* right, or *my* left, but joined through God in Christ, *our* body. By this commitment – by this love – “We [who] are treated as imposters ... are true; [we who are treated as dying,] see we are *alive*.”^{xiv}

Oh, Trinity Church!

By renewing our individual lives and *turning our cars around*;

by daring belief that God’s hopes can be fulfilled and devoting ourselves to the promise of that Resurrection – not as an airy theological idea, but as *an achievable potential* we can consequentially begin in our own lives;

by committing to one another in Love and building ourselves from a mere *collection*, to a *collective* – the very Body of Christ! –

then this world that *is* sick, divided, and lost ... *will* be healed, united, and made holy by the very same mighty Love of God.

In this hope we begin our Lent, praying,
Good Lord, deliver us.
Amen.

ⁱ From “The Great Litany” in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 148.

ⁱⁱ 2 Corinthians 1:8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fredrickson, David E. “2 Corinthians” *The Letters And Legacy Of Paul*, edited by Margaret Aymer, Cynthia Briggs Kittredge, and David A. Sánchez, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2014, p. 474. In the essay, Fredrickson translates 2 Cor. 1:9.

^{iv} Based on their experiences of us growing up in their front yards and at their kitchen tables, anyone who has met my wife will know that this comeuppance was always foreshadowed for me, and not for her.

^v I referenced this lesson, customarily appointed for Ash Wednesday, in a sermon I delivered last Thursday during the Cathedral Church of Saint Paul’s Lenten preaching series. Today’s sermon shares exegesis and illustrations with my earlier text prepared for the Cathedral setting.

^{vi} 2 Corinthians 6:1.

^{vii} 2 Corinthians 6:2, from Isaiah 49:8.

^{viii} I drove a 1969 Cadillac Sedan de Ville for three years – a 472 V8 behemoth. Super fast, yet it floated like a marshmallow. About the ashtrays: one in each door (4); 1 in the dash; 1 in the back of the front seat, presumably for the person sitting in the middle of the back seat. Now that I type this, there may have been two in the middle there ... is that even possible?

^{ix} Don't tell me we can't do it – end racism, halt climate change, stop the self-destructive politics of division. [We smoked on international flights until the year 2000](#), a fact that reassures me we can do near anything, should we have the will and endurance.

^x Haltingly achieved as it was, fragile as it remains – and even as cigarettes continue to haunt my dreams.

^{xi} 2 Corinthians 6:4-5.

^{xii} 2 Corinthians 6:6-7a.

^{xiii} 2 Corinthians 6:7b.

^{xiv} 2 Corinthians 6:8-9.