

Date: February 22, 2026 (Lent 1)

1. Texts: Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Ps. 32; Romans 5:12-19; Matthew 4:1-11.
2. Subject: sin.
3. Topic: conversations about sin.
4. Aim: challenge, encourage engagement.
5. Proposition: "Sin is real. Temptation is real. Pretense about such is unhelpful."

SIN IS REAL—LET'S NOT HIDE FROM IT

Ash Wednesday, the season of Lent and especially the first Sunday in Lent occupy a tense position in the liturgical and spiritual tradition of the Church—at least in the last sixty years of our history.

You see, Ash Wednesday and Lent 1 clearly focus on the reality of sin and temptation. According to our millennia-long theological traditions, sin is objectively real, and we are being lured to engage in it daily. The themes of Ash Wednesday and Lent are real even today.

But modern-day North America doesn't want to believe in sin or its consequences. Oh, we know that people do bad things. But these are minimized through the application of ideology, economic theory and perhaps some insights of the social sciences. Sin is relativized and even normalized. In the Church we avoid mentioning sin for fear of alienating potential worshippers. Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday in Lent find it hard to gain a footing in the lives of contemporary North Americans.

We might start by divorcing sin from guilt. Guilt is not a good thing. It doesn't motivate well. It is often misplaced. At its best, guilt is a personal admission of wrongdoing. At its worst, it is a whip with which our poor self-image beats us into submission. Sin and guilt are not the same. We should not allow guilt to grab a hold in our thoughts and prayers.

Sin is all that we do to create moral and spiritual barriers in our lives. These are barriers between us and God, us and other people, and us and our truest selves. Sin is the walls we build that cut us off from God's love and grace. Sin is the barrier between us and other people, especially the people in need of support

and grace. Sin is the chains that stop us from being the quality of persons God designed us to be.

It is possible to recognize when we are hiding behind these barriers. But this requires a certain amount of spiritual and moral honesty. We have to find the courage to examine our motives and actions. Our questions become

- “Are my thoughts, words and actions cutting me off from God’s love and grace?”
- “Am I wounding the dignity and circumstances of other people?”
- “Am I actually tearing down the image of God in me?”

When any of your answers is “yes”, then you are engaging in sin.

It is important to note here, that sin is not just committing crimes. Breaking the law is wrong and should be classified as sin. But that’s not the real temptation for us. Committing crimes was not the temptations confronting Jesus.

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. ... The tempter came and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.”

... Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you,’ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.’ ”

... Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”¹

Jesus was tempted to feed himself after fasting 40 days. Jesus was tempted with proving his identity with miracles. Jesus was tempted to be the King of creation without suffering. These are not evil things. Jesus was tempted with quick achievement of his goals. He was tempted not with committing crimes, but with short cuts to God’s plan. We will be tempted to achieve what seems to us to be beneficial.

¹ Matthew 4:1-10.

You and I have to be spiritually and morally honest with ourselves especially in regards to what we think are our good actions and plans.

As long as we are honest with ourselves, recognizing sin is doable. Dealing with sin is another question.

We start with confession. This is the apology for engaging in sin. We apologize to God, and we apologize to those we have hurt if appropriate to do so. It's part of the honest recognition we've already thought about. Confession is the start. With confession we tear down—or at least smash a hole through—the barriers we have created.

Repentance—or the change of our moral and spiritual direction—is the next step. We change our thoughts, actions and patterns so that God's image may be made more real in the lives of others and ourselves. The more engrained and entrenched the sinful patterns are, the more difficult the process of repentance is.

Sin becomes habitual when it serves a purpose in our lives over time. We derive some ongoing benefit from sin. It could be a superior position or financial benefits. It could be that we find some relief from our own circumstances. A hunger for power, control and even pleasure will often be the starting point for our habitual sin.

The more engrained and entrenched our sinful patterns are, the more difficult the process of repentance is. So, we start with confession and seek to move to repentance. And then we start over with confession and make another move to repentance. I would suggest that you don't take on any huge or weighty experiences of sin. Cut them up into smaller pieces with which you can more successfully deal.

And exercise patience, particularly when dealing with habitual sin. It took time to create the habit. It'll take time to undo it. It will be crucial to remember that all are beloved by God. Even sin does not negate God's love and compassion.

Ah, but what do we do with the sin of others or the sin of society? This is certainly difficult.

We can assess sins in the lives of others when they commit crimes, such as murder, sexual assault and engaging in conquests. Such are sins, even if the perpetrators don't acknowledge God as we do.

But, for those who do recognize God as we do, we can be even clearer about sin. We Christians are obligated to speak the truth in love, as highlighted in Galatians 4.

"Speak the truth in love," means communicating honest, accurate, and necessary truths with compassion, kindness, and humility to build others up rather than tear them down. It requires prioritizing the listener's spiritual or personal well-being over personal victory or venting frustration.

Mindful of Christ's command to love, we can apply our definitions from above, and so assess the level and impact of the sins of others. We can say, "This is sinful, and your faith obligates you to deal with your sin."

When they seek to justify their actions—and they will seek that—we then publicly apply our framework:

- "Are your thoughts, words and actions cutting you off from God's love and grace?"
- "Are you wounding the dignity and circumstances of other people?"
- "Are you actually tearing down the image of God in yourself?"

If they can find the spiritual and moral courage for honesty, then you can guide them along the path towards confession and repentance.

This is a difficult process, which will demand much from us—humility, compassion, love and courage. It is possible, but not easy.

But remember Christ's command to love others as he has loved us. He proved his love with personal sacrifice, but throughout his ministry and in his

crucifixion. The difficult process of dealing with sin and temptation is a part of his command to love.

With that realization, we return to the beginning. Ash Wednesday and the first Sunday in Lent challenge us. Their themes of sin and temptation remain very real even today, despite the fact that most of North America doesn't want to think about them. Their realities are founded upon Christ's command to love and God's justice and compassion. We Christians impoverish ourselves if we neglect these themes out of fear and anxiety. Let's be grateful for Ash Wednesday and Lent, so that we might experience the courage to live the lives God intends for us all.

AMEN.