

REACHING FOR GOD

The First Sunday in Lent
March 1, 2020
Trinity Episcopal Church
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The late psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May took the position in his book *Addiction and Grace* that there is a God-sized hole in each of us that we often try to fill with other things. This, he says, is the essence of what is going on in addiction. With humility, gentleness, and wisdom, May demonstrates compellingly that all humans are subject to addiction. Not one of us has not looked towards things other than God to try to satisfy our longing for spiritual nourishment and comfort. “Alcohol and drugs,” he writes, “are simply more obvious and tragic addictions than others have.” (p. 11) He lists dozens of substances, behaviors, and objects that can become addictions: anger, approval, being nice, being right, causes, psychotherapy, revenge, sports – the list consumes two full pages (pp. 38-39). The popular Christian writer Sean Gladding puts the matter very succinctly; he asks, “What do you reach for when you don’t like the way you feel?”

The biblical witness is very clear that God did not create us with God-sized holes. The story of Adam and Eve teaches us that we were created to live in harmony with God, but that there are limits. The serpent knows this, and it is precisely questioning the consequences of defying those limits that he uses to tempt Eve: “You will not die,” says the serpent, “for God knows that when you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” (Gen. 3:4b-5) This sounds appealing to Eve, as it does to Adam; but it is exactly the boundary God does not want them to cross. It is at this moment that the God-sized hole opens up in human beings. No longer in harmony with God, but instead trying to be like God, humanity started down its terrible path of seeking to control things that only God is in a position to control.

The devil used the same tactic with Jesus in the wilderness. He tempts Jesus to abuse his power in a way that would have destroyed his vocation as Messiah. “Command these stones to become loaves of bread;” “throw yourself down” from the pinnacle of the Temple; “fall down and worship me” so that all the kingdoms of the world can be yours (Matt. 4). But Jesus stands him down: “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘worship the Lord your God, and serve only him’” (Matt. 4:10). Jesus is utterly obedient to God, absolutely true to his vocation. He will not do what is outside God’s will for him. To do so would be to abandon his vocation. In modern psychological terms, Jesus is radically authentic – he is the man God created him to be.

In the radical authenticity of this man absolutely true to God’s will and purposes for him, the people who encountered Jesus knew that they were encountering God. Just as Adam and Eve’s disobedience – their choosing to be something other than they were – opened up the God-sized hole in human beings, so Jesus’ obedience fills and closes it, if we place our faith and trust in him. Jesus’ invitation to us is really quite simple, though hardly easy. He invites us to live authentically by reaching for God rather than reaching for whatever we tend to reach for when we don’t like how we feel. For in reaching for God instead of for the drink, or the drug, or the chocolate, or the television remote, we are opening up the door to finding out who we really are.

The season of Lent truly is an annual opportunity for spiritual renewal. It is absolutely not only a time in which we endure the discomfort of giving something up or focus on penance. If it is only these things, it makes for an unpleasant and frustrating season from which we will probably learn nothing, and in which we are unlikely to grow. However, if we give up that thing we tend to reach for when we are uncomfortable and reach for God instead, the outcome is likely to be very different.

Here is a tip to help you to understand how God might be wanting you to grow in this season. It is very simple, and I find that it is something that almost always occurs if we are paying attention during Lent. Even in these first few days since Ash Wednesday, as you have begun your Lenten discipline, is there something that has shifted subtly in your life? Maybe something you've been meaning to do that you find you have started to do? Or something you've been wasting a lot of time on that you find you are doing less? Pay attention! It's often something just this simple that points us towards how God wants us to grow during Lent.

So, there can be real pleasure in this season: the pleasure of feeling more whole, more true to God's intentions for you, more like the person God created. I had a priest colleague many years ago who would stand at the rear of the church after the Ash Wednesday service and greet each person enthusiastically with the words, "Have a great Lent!" I used to find it a little odd, honestly, but I think it's a perfectly appropriate Lenten wish. We can indeed have a great Lent if we release our addictions, reach for God, and prepare for the resurrection of the One who can fill the God-sized hole in each of us.