

March 6, 2019 – Ash Wednesday
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21; Genesis 1 & 2

Bad Dog

It's Ash Wednesday, so I'm going to talk about shame, and guilt, and my dog. I realize it's a little ridiculous to bring my dog into a sermon on this solemn day. As I do so my pastoral propriety recoils a bit at the mismatch in topics and tones. This is the first day of Lent, not Facebook, or YouTube, or Snapchat, or whatever other venue where people go on and on about their pets. Apparently sermons, too.

Another reason to reconsider this theme is that as I tell you about my dog, about something less than admirable that my dog does, I risk admitting—even exposing—something about myself. Perhaps you have heard the saying, “There are no bad dogs, there are only bad owners.” After you hear what I'm about to say you may conclude the latter. Or maybe you know my dog and have already arrived at that conclusion. Not a bad dog, a bad owner...

All these concerns notwithstanding, I am going to tell you about something my dog does, because I think it offers an entry point, an accessible, visual, and hopefully helpful way to talk about two things that are not so lighthearted, those two things being shame and guilt. Shame and guilt are Lenten words, at least that's what many people say, if you ask them what this church season is about, they will tell you, Lent is about feeling bad about yourself, and the words often used to describe this are shame and guilt. The words are often used interchangeably. I suspect many dictionaries will even tell you the words are synonyms. When it comes to general conversation, they probably are. But today, Ash Wednesday, I want to make an important distinction between shame and guilt, a theological distinction, and I think my dog can help.

That's because my dog can help herself to food items, which are left out on the kitchen counter. She is just tall enough, if she stands on her hind legs, to reach food that is out on the counter, which she will do, when no one else is in that room. She must have been beside herself with joy the day she found a plate full of freshly fried bacon, which was supposed to be for BLT's, which became LT's. I am also sure she enjoyed the sausage links that were elements of shish kebabs, which were on a tray that was going to be brought outside and put on the grill. Interestingly enough, as she went at the kebabs she left the raw shrimp, which were also on the skewers. She must not be into shellfish. On another occasion I wondered if she got a stomach ache after gobbling up the bread rolls that were rising on a pan on the counter, she was able to reach five of them, five big globs of raw dough, all gone. You may wonder at the people, the owner, the household's main food preparer, who still leaves food items out on the kitchen counter in dog's reach. I leave the kitchen for the briefest amount of time, I don't even think she's around, but then I return and the food's not around. Or I think I've pushed a food item far enough to the center of the counter to be out of her reach. I was sure I had done so with the pan of rising bread rolls. She really extended herself that time.

Our dog knows she shouldn't do this. We'll find her after the fact, after the crime, after she's made food disappear she often tries to make herself disappear, to make herself small. She creeps away, slouching, dropping her head, looking up under her brows. She clearly feels bad about herself, which I reinforce, when I tell her, “Bad dog!” I have said that to her. And she agrees. But this does not deter her from doing the same thing again.

I think this is the difference between shame and guilt. My dog eats forbidden food and feels shame, feels it acutely, she cowers underneath its weight, is the very picture of shame. But I do not think she feels guilt. Guilt implies awareness of a wrong and regret about it, and the ability to do other. My dog would do it again, she does do it again, it is almost as if she cannot help herself. This is the critical difference, theologically, between shame and guilt. Guilt means taking responsibility for a wrong action, acknowledging that one can do better. Shame is the assumption that there is no better; shame is the belief that all that one deserves is ridicule, at and to one's very core. Guilt is knowing you have done something bad. Shame is thinking that you are bad.

You are not bad. That is not what today is about. Ash Wednesday is not the annual announcement that you should be ashamed of yourself. Contrary to how it may be commonly understood, Lent is not a season whose aim is to make you feel bad. You are not bad. We are not bad. We cannot be, because we are owned by ultimate goodness. That's what Christian faith says. Christian faith says that we are not our own, we belong to something greater. We belong to God, to the ultimate goodness that made us. When we were made that ultimate goodness declared that we were good, too, that creation is good. At the beginning of it all God said of the light, and of the seas, and of the plants, and of the animals—dogs are included in this—God said of it all, “it is good.” And then God made human beings. And then God said, “it is very good.” And then God told the human beings to take care of creation, to eat the good things that God made, to enjoy the earth and each other, to care for this world, in all its naked newness. The humans were naked, too, and they did not feel shame.

Shame came later. Shame came when the humans did something they knew they should not have done, when they reached up to the kitchen counter for the food they weren't supposed to eat. Afterward they thought they should hide; they thought they could hide. As if we can hide from God, who sees in secret, as today's Gospel reminds us, Almighty God, to whom all desires are known and no secrets are hid, as our confession reminds us. God knows who we are, and what we have done.

The season of Lent is a time to stop hiding, or thinking we can hide, or thinking that hiding helps. Lent is a time to be open and up front about the ways we fail. Lent is a time to acknowledge guilt—which is also a good thing. Guilt is a good thing. Guilt reminds us there is right and there is wrong. Guilt reminds us that the things we do and do not do have grave consequences on the created world, and on our neighbors, and on ourselves. One of those wrong things that we do, that has grave consequences, is when we tell ourselves that we are bad, or when we tell others that they are bad. This is not true. This is not right. When you come to church on Ash Wednesday, you know this, because it's one of the first things we hear in today's prayer of the day: God hates nothing God has made. God created us good.

But we hear even more than that on Ash Wednesday. Fast on the heels of that first announcement, that God hates nothing God has made, we hear that God forgives the sins of all who are penitent. That could be all of us—if you've ever felt a little guilty, or even a lot. It is nothing to be ashamed of. This is what Lent is about, this is the good news that at the center of this season, that God so loves the world that God comes to us in Jesus. God so loves us, every one of us, that God keeps creating us anew, giving us clean hearts, and renewed spirits. Lent is not a season of shame, it is a season that proclaims that we are not helpless. We couldn't help ourselves, but we have the greatest help possible, God.