

Isaiah 58:1-12
Psalm 51:1-17

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-21

Every year there are more than 300,000 cases of child poisoning. Maybe there have been some of you here who have called Poison Control. Perhaps some of you have rushed a child to the emergency room. If so, there is a good chance that the first thing that was given to your child was a substance called activated charcoal. It's a standard emergency room treatment. Activated charcoal is made from burning coconut shells and hardwood at a very high temperature. The resulting ashes are injected with steam and acid to create this incredibly fine powder. Charcoal does not break down in the digestive system, and because the powder is so fine, it can move through the whole system into all the little folds. A fifty-gram dose has the same square foot coverage of more than a football field. As it moves through the system, the charcoal binds to the toxins and absorbs them out of the tissue so that healing can begin. Every day, lives are saved by this black, burned powder.

Seth Dietrich, an Episcopal priest, suggests that Lent is the time of the year when we acknowledge that we have ingested some things that are not good for us. In Lent we name the poisons in our bodies and minds. We poison our own personal lives and we poison society. One of the tenets of the Reformed faith is that humanity is sinful. We all poison our own personal lives and society. All of humanity does. We call that "original sin." That does not mean that if you are going to sin, be original about it. It does not mean we cannot do good. It does not mean we are incapable of doing good. What it means is that we cannot *not* sin. What it means is that, by nature, we are sinners. In the words of Mae West, "I used to be Snow White — but I drifted." The prophet Isaiah,

revealed on God's behalf the sin, the poison of Israel: "You serve your own interest ...and oppress all your workers." That was but one example of sin.

I came upon a contemporary example of sin. People take longer to vacate a parking space when they know someone is waiting. Penn State sociologist Barry Ruback observed 200 exiting drivers in a mall parking lot. When no one was waiting for the spot, the average time it took for a driver to back out was 26 seconds. When someone was waiting, the average time increased to 31 seconds. When the waiting car blew a horn, the time it took to back out was 43 seconds. Ruback attributes this orneriness to our "territorial instinct to defend our space." In Christian theological speak, we would call it "sin."

God, through the prophet Isaiah, was critical of Israel as a nation. Today, God might have something to say to us as a nation, as a society. Many of us have been following the story of the events that have led up to Black Lives Matter movement, a campaign against systemic racism and violence. There has been anywhere from a concern to an outrage about the questionable killing of some African-Americans by police. The movement began after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African-American teen Trayvon Martin. Then there were the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, who was fatally shot by police, and Eric Garner who died in police custody, police having used a chokehold which is prohibited by New York Police Department policy. There have been deaths of numerous other African-Americans by police actions or while in police custody. There is controversy surrounding these deaths. The Confederate flag continues to be displayed by many. Racism is still alive and well in our society. As the Episcopal priest has suggested, many people of

color are accustomed to ingesting trace amounts of systemic injustice for generation after generation. Racism is a poison, a sin, in our society.

The vicar of an Episcopal mission in Alaska was called to another parish, so the vestry proceeded to correspond with the National Council about a new minister's being sent to this distant Alaskan village. The National Council wrote back encouragingly, but required the vestry to conduct a thorough self-study replete with myriad and intricate forms as to their congregation's goals and objectives and how they envisioned their past, present, and future. Though the vestry was not happy with all of this paperwork, they nonetheless complied and sent to New York the required documents, expecting to receive a minister shortly. What they received instead was another raft of forms that requested information regarding the kind of person they were looking for. Once again they took congregational surveys, filled out the forms, sent them in and still they got no word. After this went on for 18 months, with numerous letters and forms between the New York office and the Alaskan outpost, the vestry fashioned the following letter, which they sent to the National Council. It said simply: "Forget the minister; we have found sinning is more fun!" They had a pastor in 10 days! We may joke that sinning is more fun. The truth, we all know is that we continue to ingest poison, we continue to sin. Original sin still affects us.

On this Ash Wednesday, we boldly proclaim that the cross of Jesus Christ is the only true antidote to the poison in us and in our world. In the Old Testament to sit in sackcloth and ashes was a sign of penitence. The ashes used for Ash Wednesday are the ashes of palm leaves used for the previous year's Palm Sunday. Some churches burn their own palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday. Tried that once.

Won't do that again! This ashen mark is our bold proclamation that the cross of Jesus Christ is the only true antidote to the poison in us and in our world. Like the activated charcoal that absorbs the poison someone might ingest, these ashes represent how Christ has absorbed our sins. God, through Jesus Christ, removes our sins from us, and does so every day.

Thus, there is an antidote to original sin. Christ makes forgiveness possible. Christ makes it possible for us to make amends, to start over, to live a life of righteousness. Many have a tendency to think of righteousness as personal piety. We don't steal, don't lie, don't take the Lord's name in vain; don't covet our neighbors things. We pray, read scripture, and worship regularly. However, such acts of personal piety are but one side of the coin. The other side of the righteousness coin refers to having a right relationship to God. And to have a right relationship with God means to have a right relationship with others. To have a right relationship with others is integral to having a right relationship with God. You cannot have a right relationship with God if you don't have a right relationship with others. This right relationship with others is what Isaiah was referring to when he judged the Israelites, "You serve your own interest ...and oppress all your workers." Isaiah spoke against the injustices of the land. Kathleen Norris, the author of the book *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, said, "[Righteousness] refers to someone who is doing "just" things. Someone who is seeking justice for the poor, the widow, the orphan - it's a classic, prophetic use of the word." Isaiah asked Israel to do just things: share your bread with the hungry, bring the homeless poor into your homes, cover the naked, and do not hide yourself from your kin. That is what it means to have a right relationship with God.

As we have the ashes imposed, remember that you are a sinner, a sinner
redeemed by God through Jesus Christ. Remember, that you are called to righteous
living.

Hosanna in the highest!
Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.