

No Offense

Week 1: Introduction

We are beginning a brand-new message series for the season of Lent that we are calling *No Offense*. An offense can be something that breaches a law or rule or something that simply strikes us as distasteful or unpleasant, rude, or unkind, or simply annoying.

Before I begin, let me say there's a difference between offenses and offensive behavior as opposed to abuse and abusive behavior. Victims of abuse must deal with serious issues that sometimes require professional help, and we don't mean to be dismissive of the challenges they face.

As we kick off this series, I want to introduce to you *three key facts* about offense that will form the foundation of this series. First fact: *Offenses are inevitable*. Life affords us opportunities to be offended in every way every day. For instance, sometimes when I see people in the grocery store, I can see them eyeing up my grocery cart to see what I am buying. I must admit that sometimes I feel judged.

People will say all kinds of things that are thoughtless and careless and can offend us. Now there are two kinds of offenses: *perceived and real*. There are some offenses that we experience that offend us based on our sensibilities, our past, or our opinions about the world and about ourselves. Offense *is taken* but no offense *was intended*. And, frankly, no real harm or injury has been done. Our pride may be wounded, our self-image may be challenged, a nerve may have been hit, but there's no permanent damage sustained. If you are a parent, you may get very easily offended if anyone says anything about your kids. Whether they are right or wrong, even if they have helpful information that you could use, *you don't want to hear it*.

When we are secure and confident, we are far less likely to register offense. Oftentimes, what offends touches on our insecurities. Maybe it's their grades in school or their team stats; for others it's the way they look, their weight, or their clothes; maybe it's social status or educational background. All of these can be a trigger for being offended. For some people, it is politics. We all know people that you can't even talk politics to, because you hold an opinion that even slightly disagrees with them and they can go from 0 to 60 on the offensive speedometer. And then there are the people who are offended by everything. They go through life looking for opportunities to be offended. On the other hand, sometimes people are offended because they are challenged with the truth. A message hits way too close to home and it offends.

We see moments of needing to offend with the great moral leaders. They offended people because they were challenging cultures or community standards, or commonly held beliefs. We see this with Dr. Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement. We also see it with Jesus. He offended lots of people, a lot of the time. One time, he taught something that contradicted the teaching of the religious leaders. And the apostles came up and told him that he had offended the Pharisees. Jesus essentially responded, "*I intended to offend them.*" When Jesus taught about the Eucharist, many of his disciples were so offended, so much so, that they stopped following him. At times, all great teachers and leaders will offend people by challenging the status quo demanding change. Sometimes, change can offend people more than anything else. And taking offense can be a defense mechanism to resist change.

We will experience perceived offenses then there are offenses that are *real offenses*. People do things to hurt us. They lie to us. They gossip about us. They cheat us. We live in a sin-stained world where others will hurt us and betray us. And often it isn't just our enemies... friends and family members can disappoint us in this way too.

We cannot get by in life without experiencing offense nor can we get by without offending others. Offenses are inevitable.

Second Fact. *Offenses are a trap*. It is a trap that will handicap us and keep us from living up to our potential. Did you ever notice that an offended person often has a sense of entitlement? Everyone owes him or her something. They are owed an apology or some other kind of recompense or compensation, and they seem to be waiting around for it and so they get stuck. They spend too much time playing the victim and waiting for others to fix the offense rather than actually living their lives.

When we take offense and hold it in our heart instead of dealing with it in the healthy ways (something that we'll be talking about in this series), we're nourishing hurt, anger, jealousy, resentment, bitterness, and hatred in our heart. We're hurting our heart. We're weighing it down. We're fashioning for ourselves a heavy heart.

Offended people can be self-centered. It can be a form of narcissism. I take everything that happens personally and apply it to myself. I get stuck there. Offenses are a trap.

Third fact. *We have a choice about how we handle offenses*. Today, the Gospel of Mark tells us about the *choices* we have available to handle offense in a healthy way.

The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert, and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. Mark 1:12

Jesus was tempted even though he was following the direction of the Holy Spirit. He wasn't tempted because he was apart from God's will but because he was in it. We certainly can make the mistake of putting ourselves in situations where we are tempted and should avoid those places. Don't frequent the internet late at night; don't hang out with the wrong crowd at school; don't lunch with the people who always gossip. Avoid temptation when you can. But even when you do avoid temptation, it finds you. Temptation is a part of life. And a constant temptation is to internalize offense and allow it to dwell in our hearts.

Through this series, we'll learn skills to handle that kind of temptation. But even when we give into it, we still have a choice. Jesus tells us that choice. He says:

This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the good news. Mark 1:14-15

When we allow offense into our hearts, we can choose to repent and believe in the good news.

The word repent might have a bad connotation for you. It might ring of religious fanaticism or apocalyptic fantasy. *Repent the end is near!* So, let me redefine the word for you and offer you another image. To repent simply means to change your mind. A change in thinking that leads to a change of behavior. You repent when you turn away from something that is hurtful or harmful, or just plain wrong. To repent is to change intention and direction. Repentance brings the conviction that we need to change. *Conviction not condemnation.*

Conviction is an internal desire to change while condemnation is an outward judgment that you've done wrong. The Holy Spirit brings conviction so that we want to repent and change. A lot of people get this wrong when it comes to God: God is all about - *Conviction not condemnation.*

We can choose to repent and believe the good news that past and present offenses do not define us and we can let them go.

We can choose to repent and believe the good news that Christ died for us and our sins are forgiven so we need to forgive others.

We can choose to repent and believe the Good News that even though others don't treat us *as we deserve*, God has treated us *better than we deserve*, that God is for us even when others are against us.

We can choose to repent of our need for life to always be easy and believe the Good News that God makes all things work together for our Good.

We can choose to repent of the offense we take when the world doesn't revolve around us and believe the Good News that we get to live for God's eternal purposes.

So, as we stand at the starting line of this series and this season here are two commitments, I'd like you to consider making. First: commit to joining us for the whole series. Join us here at the Church of the Holy Eucharist for the next four weeks or, if you can't join us in person, join us live online. We live stream our 8:30 & 10:30 Sunday Masses. Second: Consider times in your life when you are offended. As part of this reflection begin to think about what offends you and start a list. It might begin to provide you with insight that you didn't have before, insight that could lead you to change your mind.

We read in the gospel of Mark today, *He was among the wild beasts and the angels ministered to him* Mark 1.13 A striking juxtaposition but one not unlike the situations we find ourselves in all the time. We experience real and perceived offenses all the time; it is part of the landscape in which we live our lives, raise our families, do our jobs. They can't be avoided, they can't be ignored, and they're going to just keep on coming. However, God's grace in our hearts can dramatically change how we experience these offenses. We can access this grace through the Lenten practices the church calls us to at this time of year: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. God's grace in our hearts can dramatically change our hearts, lighten our hearts. Hearts that are light, can't carry offenses.