

This morning, we did something brave. We prayed the Great Litany, or as some might call it, the “Very, Very Long Litany.” It really does go on and on. Just when you think we’ve covered everything that needs to be said, it finds three more things to confess. Apparently, grace is thorough above all else.

And maybe that length is exactly the point.

The Great Litany refuses to rush us into Lent. It refuses to let us pretend that only a few sins need naming. It stretches us until we realize there is no corner of our life that God is unwilling to enter and heal. Not the secrets we carry, not envy, not pride, not hypocrisy, not violence, not fear, or war, or injustice. And today, we say it all out loud. And we say it together. The Litany gives us the gift of speaking our secrets aloud. And we do it not so we can wallow in them, but so they don’t own us anymore.

And, in this entrance to Lent, we are not the only ones who practice something like this. Our Jewish siblings observe Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a time for communal confession and return. Our Muslim neighbors are now observing Ramadan, a month of fasting, prayer, self-examination, and mercy. In the Ignatian tradition, the daily examen offers an honest look at where we moved toward love and where we didn’t. And in the Twelve Steps of recovery, there’s a fearless moral inventory and confession, not to shame, but to heal.

Across traditions, there is a common human wisdom: healing requires honesty and a willingness to see ourselves.

Speaking the truth aloud breaks the grip of shame.

The Great Litany is part of that long, ancient tradition. It’s not about showing worthlessness. It’s a practice of clarity and the courage to say, “Here is where we have missed the mark. Here is where we need mercy.”

That is not humiliation. That is humility.

On Ash Wednesday, we heard again, “*Remember that you are dust.*” We talked about *Adamah*, earth, or *humus*. We remember we are *human*, creatures of earth. That is our origin story. And from that same root, *humus*, we get two words that sound almost identical but travel very different spiritual paths: humility and humiliation.

Humility means being grounded, close to the earth, and clear about who we are...finite, fragile, beloved dust brought to life by God’s breath. Humiliation means being pushed face down into the dirt, made small in a way that cuts us off from love.

Same root. Very different experience. Lent calls us to humility, not humiliation.

Humility says, “I am dust, and I am beloved.” Humiliation says, “I am dust, and I am worthless.”

And I don't know about you, but I've felt the difference in my own life. I've known what it's like to be grounded in truth and what it's like to be crushed by shame. They are not the same. God formed us from dust and called it good. God kneels in the earth and breathes life into it.

So when we prayed this morning, we chose to kneel, either in body or spirit. That's grounding. That's trusting. That's saying, "Here is the truth of who we are and whose we are." In a world that often tells us to hide our weaknesses, that's no small thing.

In Genesis, when Adam and Eve eat the fruit, lightning does not strike them dead. But they hide. "*I was afraid,*" Adam says, "*because I was naked.*" Shame enters the story, and they duck behind a tree. Not because they suddenly became less in God's eyes, but because they felt exposed in their own hearts. Because vulnerability is terrifying.

And God's first words are not, "How dare you disobey?" but "*Where are you?*"

That feels to me more like the language of a caring parent.

Over time, the Church has tried to explain what happened in that garden and how healing happens. Somewhere along the way, we leaned heavily on a legal view: sin as debt, God as judge, Jesus paying what we owed. It was serious theology meant to honor justice.

But if that's the only story we tell about God, then God can seem like an angry deity. The Cross feels like just a contract. And Lent starts to feel like accounting season...time to pay up, people.

But let's look at the Gospel.

This takes place right after his baptism. Jesus has just heard, "*You are my beloved.*" Then he is led into the wilderness.

And Jesus is met by the tempter who whispers, "*Prove who you are, so-called Son of God.*"

Maybe the deeper fracture Lent points out to us is that *we forget who we are*. We forget we are beloved. We buy into the narrative of being sinful to the core, even from our birth. We forget the original blessing in Genesis. We forget that all of creation was called "good". We forget that God's first posture toward us was delight.

When the Church turned the Cross into a contract, I think it was because we tried too hard to manage God's inherent mystery. Living with mystery makes us nervous. We want things to make sense. We like neat theological boxes. But God is not an equation we can solve by trying to control each other.

Scripture says, "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*" (2Cor 5:19) God revealing Godself to us in Jesus. The Cross does not create God's love. It reveals how relentless that love already is.

And when we look at it, our liturgical tradition is steeped in sacrificial language. In what is called substitutionary atonement. We pray about “*a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for the whole world.*” We call Jesus “the Lamb of God.”

For centuries, Christians have heard that language through a legal lens, as if God needed payment before forgiveness could come. But sacrifice in Scripture is not mainly about calming an angry God. It’s about the desire to draw close again and restore connection. Today, when we hear that language, we don’t have to picture a contract signed in heaven. We can imagine love pouring down. Imagine a love willing to absorb human violence instead of returning it, ...love willing to enter our wilderness and stay with us.

The Cross is not God deciding to love us. It is God showing us that love was never in question.

Anne Lamott says, “*Grace always bats last.*” (If you’ll pardon the baseball reference. Spring training has begun. 😊) No matter how wrapped up we get in our own stuff, no matter how many fig leaves we hide behind, no matter how long our Litany runs, Grace always gets the last at bat.

That is not a punishing-God story. That’s a healing-God story.

So, that changes how we see what we did this morning. We weren’t groveling before divine disappointment. We stepped out from behind the trees. Shame hides, but repentance and forgiveness step forward toward life.

And I want to call out this morning that despite what we hear and see, the world is not rotten at its core. It is wounded. And wounded things need healing, not contempt. Lent is about finding clarity—clarity about where fear controls us, where we turn to pride and self-reliance instead of trust. That clarity will help us stand for truth in this world God loves so much.

In the wilderness, Jesus does not perform for the tempter. He does not prove himself. He stands steady in belovedness. Temptation tests identity. The wilderness of Lent restores it.

So let’s trust that this season isn’t about lowering our heads in shame. It’s about standing grounded in humility, close to the earth from which we were formed, and remembering.

Remembering we are dust. Remembering we are beloved.

“*Where are you?*” God asks.

And this morning, instead of hiding, we answered.

*Here we are, Lord.*

Amen.