

It seems the first full sentence that children are able to express is often “That’s not fair.” (Notice I said they were able to express it. I didn’t say they *learned* that sentence. They already knew it from the time they were born. They felt it deep within them and were just waiting for you to teach them enough English for them to let you know that they knew how things stood.) Once a young person has told you that things are not fair there is another sentence hard on its heels: “That’s not my fault.”

They say “It’s not my fault” with at least as much passion as they observe the lack of fairness in the world. Probably more – even though they believe it less. Because they *want* that one to be true. They want to be able to say, “That’s not my fault” and to stand blameless in front of parents, teachers, and friends, and to not be punished. Because, after all, if you are punished for something that is not your fault – that’s not fair.

Ash Wednesday is the beginning of Lent. It is the forty day season we have set aside to think of repentance and new life. We concentrate on the ministry of Jesus and focus on being his disciples. We start this season of Lent with an extended confession of our sin. That is not our nature. It is our nature to maintain that the problems of this life are not fair and they are not our fault.

“Fault” is not the same thing as sin. Fault is a matter of individual misdeeds – the times you have made the wrong choice. You did a bad thing and it had painful results. Those faults are common enough and we have all done bad things that had bad results.

“Sin” is bigger than that. When we are confronted with the truth that we are sinful – it misses the point to say, “That’s not my fault.” Sin is not something we do. It is the way we are. We live in a broken relationship with God.

Sin is not a matter of making the wrong choices, doing the wrong things. Taking something that is not yours. Saying something hurtful. Those things are the *results* of sin. The sin, the broken relationship with God, that is a description of our lives.

When we confessed our sins a while ago – it was not so much a recognition that we often make the wrong choices. It was a cry to God that ***there are no choices*** that will heal our relationship with him. We live in a world that cannot be made right by what we do.

Let me give you examples: What if a young man said he wanted to study art but his father was set on him majoring in economics. The young man said, “Wouldn’t it be a sin to turn your back on art if you really feel that’s what God is calling you to do?” Yes. That would be a sin. “Wouldn’t it be a sin to not follow the advice of the father who loves you?” Yes. That would be a sin.

Now let’s take it to the next level. The young man wants to say, “That’s not fair.” “If I am caught in such a dilemma then it is not really a sin. It is just a hard choice. Why call it a sin?” The answer is, we call it a sin, because it will act like a sin. It will hurt you. If you decide not to pursue your love of art there will always be some regret. You will always wonder what you could have created. And you might resent your parents. On the other hand, if you go against your father’s wishes it will hurt him. Your relationship might suffer. He will always wonder what you could have accomplished. Choose what you must do and it will not be your fault – but it cannot escape sin.

If a woman said she had to get out of a hurtful relationship. She asked, “Wouldn’t wasting my life in this painful relationship be a sin?” Yes. “Wouldn’t walking out on my commitment be a sin?” Yes.

That is the difference between sin and fault. Sin is not a matter of making the wrong choice. It is a matter of not having a perfect relationship with God in this life. Perhaps you can avoid being at fault but you cannot avoid sin.

That is why we set aside forty days every year to examine our lives and examine our world. We do not need forty whole days to come to the conclusion that the things we encounter in this life are not fair. We were born knowing that. We also know that suffering does not depend upon whether or not we make the right choice. We have learned that there are no choices that lead to a pain-free life.

Surprisingly, this is good news. We keep Lent to give ourselves the chance to come to a profound conclusion about life: We cannot have a whole and happy relationship with God because of our perfect choices and our life that is free of sin. The very hopelessness of trying to avoid sin can bring an end to your quest for a sinless life. The ashes on your head are there to remind you – you are not the creator. You are not responsible for the world. You are God's creature. You are dust and to dust you shall return.

As long as you think you could have avoided sin, somewhere along the line, there will be no peace in your soul. Not completely. You will never get past the frustration of trying to find peace of mind by saying, "That's not my fault." You will always believe that sin is in your power and you could have evaded it if you were smart enough, or good enough. If you had only known more Bible verses. If only someone else had not messed up your life. If you could only go back and do it over again.

As long as you think you could have avoided sin – you will carry a crushing burden.

Recognize sin. It's deeper, more mysterious, and more profound than fault. We cannot maintain a relationship with God by avoiding sin. Understand that, believe that, and lay down the burden of trying.

Jesus has good news for you. You are a hopeless sinner. You cannot earn God's love. Stop trying. Stop trying to *earn* God's love with the understanding that God's chief desire for all eternity is to love you. He will not let anything prevent Him from loving you.

God saw us in our sin and he recognized how deep and mysterious it was. God has never been fooled into thinking that the gulf between him and us is just a few misdeeds which we could have avoided if we had been paying more attention.

God knew it would take nothing less than becoming a human being and living with us.

It is Lent. We focus on the humanity of Jesus. God came to live with us as a human being. It cost him – suffering, frustration, humiliation – but he came into our lives and made them his.

That is why this service is solemn. The season of Lent is austere. It is because the message is death. We began this service reminding ourselves that we are dust and to dust we shall return. God joined humanity as Jesus Christ and he joined in that message. He, too, became dust and knew that he would die. If he had not died, he could not have defeated death. Only through the cross could Jesus call us from the other side of death. We must recognize death to hear the news of eternal life. We must recognize our sin to hear God's promise of forgiveness.

Jesus calls us from our sin into a new life with him. He calls us forward. Guilt turns us back. As long as we maintain the age old claim "that's not my fault" we look backwards. We repeat, "If I could just do it over again." "If I knew then what I know now." "If I could have made different choices."

God calls you forward. God invites you to lay down the burdens you are carrying and walk into the future with strength and hope and courage. The strength of not having the weight of sin. The hope of living every new day with a chance to use your life as God intended. The courage of knowing that you are God's own child and nothing can separate you from his love.

We are sinful. But God has come to us as Jesus Christ to tell us we live in his forgiveness. Strictly speaking, that's not fair. And we may thank and praise God for it.