

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

March 9, 2011 Ash Wednesday

The Rev. Catherine R. Powell

It's time for the S-word. Yes, I'm talking about SIN.

We don't like the idea of sin. And many of us are confused about what it means. For most of us it gets caught up in long-buried struggles of childhood, struggles to feel good enough, messages that there's something wrong with us. These struggles begin when we are very young—2 or 3 years old—and we notice that there *is* something wrong with us. We can't read and write like the people around us can. We can't cook our own dinner, and even getting onto a regular chair is like scaling a mountain. And our thoughts and emotions seem to roam all over the place; we can't control them. Of course at that age we don't have any perspective or any sense of time. We live in the present and so the way we are "right now" is all there is. We feel we are the faulty model of human being and it doesn't help if our mothers blurt (even occasionally)—as mine did—"What is WRONG with you!?"

Then, around age 5 or 6 our tender consciences develop and we realize that not only are we inept, but we do bad things. At the same time our parents and teachers are expecting us to behave like nice young ladies and gentlemen and we learn to squash down our fear and confusion and anger and self-doubt and there you have it.

I believe that the sting of sin comes because we must hide it and lie about it and so we rarely get a chance to express it and find out that everyone else is in the same boat. We rarely ask for or accept help. We continue to deny-- to ourselves and others-- that we are imperfect, in fact that we are a big mess, and that sometimes we are even unpleasant and unkind.

We wear ourselves out with the public face we must put on. We stay busy desperately pretending, posing, self-protecting, posturing, trying, self-improving, bullying, coercing, and coddling. And then there's the convincing, deflecting, hiding, acting—and so on and on. It's exhausting.

Lent could be seen as a relief—hey, we're all in this together! We can let down on the pretending to be perfect.

But first we have to admit that we are a big mess.

And it is very hard to do that when others—who look so good on the surface-- are around. So we need to step away from others. That's what today's gospel is about. Jesus tells us to go into our room, to shut the door, to wait until there is quiet both inside and out, and until we can settle in the presence of God.

And then we can talk honestly to God. We can listen to our usually gentle, and always honest, God. This is the God who loves us.

And we can come to know that 1) We're OK; and 2) We can ask for help; and 3) We're all in this together.

May our ashes today remind us of our humanity, our fallibility. And during this Lent, may we find the time and space for quiet and honest conversation with God.