

**CREATE IN ME A CLEAN HEART; PSALM 51:12; ASH WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

It's the start of Lent which is defined as the forty days before Easter not counting Sundays. The number forty is significant. It recalls Israel's forty years in the wilderness and Jesus forty days in the desert – both Israel and Jesus experienced during that time their human frailty and consequently their dependence upon God.

Lent was a time in the early church when new converts to the faith embarked upon a period of fasting to simulate the experience of Israel and Jesus's deprivation in the wilderness; which reminded them of their own dependence upon God. The awareness of this dependence prepared the new converts for baptism on Easter day.

The tradition of giving something up for Lent comes from Israel and Jesus' wilderness experiences. I'm not sure giving up chocolate qualifies as an apples to apples simulation of what Israel or Jesus had to give up; but, no matter, anything we choose to go without, particularly food can serve to remind us that we are not autonomous, self-sufficient beings but that we rely for our survival and quality of life on one another and God. Lent also, therefore, became associated with repentance or penance, that is, acknowledging that we humans have a penchant for letting our egos get in the way of our better selves.

Not just Christians but Jews at Rosh Hashanah and Muslims on Ramadan – the most holy days in both of those religions – also repent and pledge to realign their lives according to Scriptural principles like the golden rule “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and the greatest commandment – “to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself.”

You might say Lent, beginning today, is our fifty thousand mile check-up. My dental hygienist told me the other day “you're perfect.” I appreciated the comment but felt compelled to say, “perfection is unattainable.”

If we don't take care of ourselves physically, intellectually – and spiritually, there's no telling where we might end up. St. Paul said we humans often don't do what we know is the right thing to do and do what we know is not the right thing. In other words, we get ourselves into trouble – from ISIS to insider trading to fudging the facts on our tax or in conversation. And, as the Bible says, confession is good for the soul.

Recently, in the year 2001, psychology took a big step forward. Back in the early 60s, the behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner proposed that it would be possible to re-train humans to the extent that we could eliminate from the face of the earth “famines, wars, and the threat of nuclear holocaust” with the help of what he called the new “technologies of behavior.”

Not surprisingly, and as you may remember, Dr. Skinner ran into much opposition to his proposed scripting of the human race.

Peter Gay, the Enlightenment scholar, referred to Skinner's ideas as “innately naïve, bankrupt and deliberately cruel.”

But the temptation of behavioral psychology was then in its infancy. At the start of this decade, building on a body of work that started in the 1980s, two psychologists invented what is known as “neuroscience.” This project emerged from watching what areas of the brain were active when people are faced with moral decisions.

Long story short, neuroscience psychologists morphed into moral philosophers. That is, they re-introduced B.F. Skinner’s notion of re-training humans to make certain decisions that would enable them to do certain things. This was all justified under a very loosely defined and conveniently used brand of philosophy Thomas Hobbes developed by perceiving the medieval world as a jungle.

The problem is the new behaviorists did not recognize or at least would not admit that they were using their own set of moral principles to determine what actions humans should and should not engage in. As you can imagine, this became a slippery slope.

The year 2001 is significant because three months after 9/11 the founders of neuroscience held a series of meetings with top-level representatives from the Department of Defense and the CIA.

Again, cutting to the chase, the psychologists agreed to have the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association loosened to allow for collaboration of psychologists with the military and national security leaders to develop programs to defend the nation.

The end result was the approval, design and implementation of torture of terrorist suspects held at various undisclosed locations and some that have become infamous. It is also worth noting that the psychologists involved in the program were paid \$81 million dollars not including their institutions of higher education that received Department of Defense grants in the tens of millions of dollars for research.

No fewer than eight new publications by several of the psychologists contracted by the government are newly published while the so-called discipline of neuro-science is still proposing that new and better moral decision-making can be programmed into societies and cultures.

The collection of essays we will be discussing at the Lenten dinners beginning next week are written by Marilynne Robinson, who, for several years has been taking on the notion that humans can or should be reduced to a set of behaviors determined and programmed by self proclaimed experts in moral reasoning.

Rather, she says, we are complex, wondrous, mysterious creatures who are imprinted with the image of God upon our hearts and born with an innate moral compass that requires nurture and study in the context of caring community. Nurture and study, she would also say, of Biblical texts and principles; and worship that offers the experience of transcendence.

The closing statement by the reviewer of the new books by the neuroscientists says this: "No psychologist has yet developed a method that can be substituted for moral reflection and reasoning, for employing our own intuitions and principles, weighing them against one another and judging as best we can. This is necessary labor for all of us. We cannot delegate it to higher authorities or replace it with handbooks."

Those early Christians, not to mention the Jews before them and the Muslims after them, had it right: we come into this world as free agents, we make decisions, sometimes we make bad decisions, that's why we know it's important to step away, like in Lent, and re-evaluate – starting with the simple confession of where we've gone astray.

The bread and the wine and the ashes today remind us that we're human. Perfection is unattainable. We make mistakes. Thankfully, we have a God who loves us back into life – heals our brokenness, then sends us back to our homes and neighborhoods and places of work with clean and willing hearts. Amen.