



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday in Lent, March 13th, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

It is hard to conceive of an aspect of the Christian faith that could be more out of step with the animating philosophy of this generation than the notion of an entire church season devoted to self-examination and repentance. It runs entirely counter to the prevailing culture.

The problem isn't self-examination. Indeed, self-examination might well be described as the obsession of our age. So much so, in fact, that if the 18th century is appropriately described as "the Age of Elegance," our own times might best be dubbed "the Age of Introspection."

Actually, this grossly understates the case. Introspection is altogether too mild a word to describe extraordinary self-absorption that is one of the primary characteristics of our times. "Self obsession" far better describes our fashionable preoccupation with our own psyches.

However, the thing that makes the Christian self-examination so odd, so so quaint, so out of step, is that its entire purpose is to identify our faults and flaws so we can apologize to God and try to amend our lives.

Confession, contrition and repentance are quite out of fashion these days because the process implies we might have been guilty of

something that merits repenting. And guilt is apparently considered to be the root of all evil. In fact, judging by the way so many people in the mental health business speak about it, folks might thinking the only thing we might need repent is making another human being feel guilty.

The technical expression for the nature of self-examination to which Christians subject ourselves during Lent, it is called: "confession." It involves carefully considering our thoughts and actions over the past year and apologizing to God – and if necessary ours fellow man – for those of which we are ashamed.

Funnily enough – or perhaps, not so funnily – today's version of self-examination is precisely the opposite of the Christian variety. Today people are encouraged to examine themselves not for the purpose of discovering the things for which they should rightly feel guilty, but for the purpose of eradicating guilt. And they pay huge sums to therapists who huge sums of money for helping them do just that – far more than they would ever dream of putting in a church alms bason.

Such therapists, doubtless, earn their money because it is difficult to help people to review their lives and conclude they aren't guilty of anything. After all, most of us are painfully

aware that we have done many, many things about which we should rightly feel ashamed.

It means therapists either need to convince us that we haven't done those things that we know we ought not have done, or, alternatively, convince us some one else is to blame. The latter approach seems to be the most popular. After all, it isn't easy to convince even willing accomplices that they haven't done things they know full well they have done.

This explains why so many people are dumping on their parents these days. It is not that their parents have done anything that actually merits their censure, so much as the fact that parents are targets of opportunity. It is not hard to magnify minor teenage resentments and to magnify them out of all proportion in order to account for one's failings today.

Blaming our nearest and dearest for our own personal failings is one of the oldest and most unlikable of all human traits. Read the third chapter of the Genesis, and you'll discover that when God asked Adam if he had eaten of the tree of knowledge, Adam didn't do the manly thing and fess up. He immediately tried to shuffle the blame to his wife: "The woman whom thou gavest me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat."

Not very convincing: God didn't buy it. Eve didn't force Adam to eat. He could – and should – have said: "No." He might have eaten the fruit out of a desire to please Eve. But he knew God had forbidden them to eat of the fruit of the tree, and he did so anyway. Thus the fault lies with Adam just as much as it did with Eve.

When Adam came up with his lame excuse, God didn't bother to answer him. He didn't need to. No matter what mental gymnastics Adam went through to evade responsibility, he could not escape the conviction of his own conscience. Adam's experience is eloquently

expressed in the words of the collect : "We, who by our consciences are accused . . ."

All of us are "by our consciences accused . . ." It is simply part of our human nature. Just as we smell, hear, taste and see, so our consciences convict us of wrong-doing. We can suppress our consciences and refuse to use them, but we cannot eradicate them entirely. Thus the efforts of so many people to rid themselves of guilt are doomed from the very outset.

It is no surprise that so many people today are desperately trying to rid themselves of the pain caused by their guilty consciences. It is, after all, very painful thing to suffer from a guilty conscience. The anguish of guilt often far outstrips physical pain.

But before we conclude God is cruel to remind us of our shortcomings in this painful fashion, we should remember the purpose of pain. God gave us physical pain to warn us when something is going wrong with our earthly bodies. The same thing goes for pain caused by our consciences. Without the mental anguish prompted by our guilty consciences, we would be able to repent and obtain God's forgiveness.

The conscience enables us to take advantage of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the Cross. If we weren't alerted by our consciences we would pass up the forgiveness that God promises those who repent. In short, God gave us our consciences as an act of love and mercy. After all, so God loved the world, he gave his only begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life. It is our consciences that enable us to take advantage of his great gift *AMEN*.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.