

Sermon by the Rector

Lent 4-B; March 22, 2009

[Numbers 21:4-9](#)

[Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#)

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

[John 3:14-21](#)

We've heard a great deal about "toxic assets" of late. The fact is, we're all laden with them, in their financial, moral, emotional and spiritual manifestations.

These toxic assets are like the poisonous serpents mentioned in the book of Numbers. If we ignore them, don't deal with them, they sneak up on us, bite us, and poison our lives. But if we nail them up on a pole where we can see them, we also strip them of their power – their toxicity, if you will.

Jesus imparts the same message in a more appealing way. Those things which poison us and our relationships – our toxic assets – like to lurk in the dark; as a matter of fact, we ourselves prefer the darkness to the light when it comes to the toxic components of our lives. But if we bring them into the light, then it can be seen that they, too, have been wrought in God. They're part of the divine providence.

So: what are these "toxic assets"? What makes them toxic? What makes them assets?

Mostly, they're our failures: all the ways in which we've fallen short of our own expectations, and those of others; all the marks we've missed, the goals we have not attained. These realities, like serpents, sneak up on us, bite us, and poison us. They like to lurk in the darkness, and we prefer to leave them there.

Their toxic nature manifests itself in two ways: grandiosity, and defensiveness.

Sometimes grandiosity steps in when we don't acknowledge our failures, but deny them through rationalization. Not having learned their lessons, we convince ourselves that we can do things that lie beyond our power. Lately, this grandiosity has taken the form of a belief that we can manage all kinds of risk, keep our footing on even the slipperiest slope. The presence of this sort of grandiosity in the realm of finance and investment is too obvious even to need noting, but we don't have to look too far to see it in smaller, even intimate arenas. Maybe it's this failure-denying impulse to which the Letter to the Ephesians refers when it speaks rather mysteriously of devotion to the "prince", or "ruler of the power of the air." Sometimes that prince and his grandiose dreams seduce us. How interesting, and perhaps instructive, that both our current and immediate past presidents – so profoundly different in so many ways – both seem vulnerable to this prince's blandishments.

Defensiveness is the mirror image of grandiosity. It hunkers down, refuses to put anything on the table or at risk, won't step on any kind of slope, let alone a slippery one. It's the addiction to security from which the cowboys of Wall St. are obsessed with distinguishing themselves. Sometimes we, too, find ourselves hunkered down, averse to risk, when the times call for a spirit of adventure.

Watch the way in which the relationship between DC Schools Chancellor Michele Rhee, and DC Teachers' Union President George Parker, plays out in the coming months. She's the entrepreneurial spirit, ready put everything on the line for the sake of improving education. He's the defender of the hard-won gains of a besieged profession. They're showing signs of an ability to learn something from each other, and from their respective missteps.

And here's the key. God has given us the capacity to pose, to ourselves, powerfully liberating questions, of the sort Rhee and Parker might be asking right now: What are my failures? And: What can I learn from them?

In the instant we ask ourselves these questions, the serpent is nailed to the pole, and our toxic assets come out of the darkness into the light and lose their power to poison.

The answers follow two trajectories:

- 1) I can learn to measure and manage risk better than I've done before. I can figure out how, and on what slopes, I can get a firm foothold and avoid sliding all the way down. I can take into account unanticipated consequences before embarking on a course of action. We all pray fervently that Wall Street and its regulators can find their way back to the counsels of prudence these answers represent. But all of us have taken risks we haven't measured and should know we can't manage. We've all forgotten the law of unintended consequences from time to time, having grown enamored of our own wisdom. Precisely these facts about us non-Masters of the Universe laid some of the groundwork for the brutal downturn we're experiencing.
- 2) I can identify those risks I simply cannot manage, the slopes too slippery for me to get a foothold; the moral, spiritual, geographic and financial places where I dare not go. Every recovering alcoholic or substance abuser, every ex-offender, has an intimate familiarity with this sort of personal inventory. I've done a lot of work, intermittently, with people who fall in these categories. It's heartbreaking beyond words when one of them says, "I can go back to the old neighborhood, see some of my old friends. And that job? Don't need it – too much hassle." Unmanageable risks, slopes too slippery to gain a foothold. Ex-offenders and recovering addicts are all just like the rest of us, only moreso. We all have to identify the places we cannot go, and then not go there.

Successes are wonderful things. But in the end, we define ourselves far more surely and deeply by the way we respond to our failures. When we bring them into the light – nail them to the pole where we can see them – they lose their toxicity and become assets, plain and simple, in our journey towards God.

Maybe I'm taking unwarranted liberties of interpretation, but it seems to me this is what Ephesians means in its articulation of one of the great themes re-claimed by the Reformation, some 1500 years after Ephesians was written: we are saved by God's grace and mercy, not by works. We might call our works our successes: gratifying, necessary to our self-esteem, generally good for the world, but less essential to salvation than our failures. The divine mercy and grace plants those most freeing of

questions in our hearts: What are my failures? What can I learn from them? In doing so, God opens for us the royal road to salvation.