

Homily for the First Sunday of Lent (A)

St. Joseph's Neier

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Central Idea: We often get caught up in the sin of others and before you know it we are paying for crimes we really would not have committed. Jesus sets us free.

Only three people know the whole truth about what happened in the story I am about to tell. One of them is dead. One of them is a murderer and a liar. And one of them is not me. Nevertheless, this is a true story.

In the middle of the night, in a lonely field off a lonely road in Wyoming, a young man would be pistol whipped and tortured by another young man. The victim would left out in the open to linger and when found, would eventually die. It was not hard to find who was responsible: a troubled young man by the name of Aaron McKinney. The crime would become a sensation as a hate crime against homosexuals, although a recent somewhat controversial book has brought many of the assumptions about the case into serious question. But these facts are the facts, Aaron McKinney killed Matthew Shepard and he will spend the rest of this natural life in prison. End of case.

But there was another young man there as well, a young man whose story is not so open and shut. A young man that, although he was rightly convicted of a crime, could also be called a victim of sorts; a young man named Russell Henderson. Henderson, no doubt, was with McKinney when he beat and tortured Matthew Shepard. Henderson, no doubt, was an accessory to this crime. But as you look at the facts of the case, and as you hear the whole story played out, Henderson becomes a sad and pathetic casualty of the chaos of life and the bitter circumstance of being at the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong people. Let's be clear, Shepard was the real victim, but there is little doubt that Russell Henderson was the patsy.

Henderson grew up in a drunken abusive household. He never knew his father and his mother, in a word, was a mess. She eventually would be murdered herself, much like Matthew Shepard was, after her son pled guilty, but she never really became a headline. Apparently, there are no hate crimes against alcoholic, muddled mothers. No one was interested in taking up that cause. Russell would be taken in by his grandparents and he would respond, somewhat. He achieved the rank of Eagle Scout and was a proud member of the FFA. He could have been a kid from Neier. But then he got in with the wrong crowd. There were drugs. There was booze. There was a series of incredibly bad choices. After reading the book, I personally do not believe Sheperd's murder was a hate crime, even though, the perpetrator, McKinney says it was. Instead I think it was a drug fueled drug deal gone wrong and he is more afraid of his drug dealing crowd than being known as a homophobe. And although he was there during the crime and did nothing to stop McKinney's brutality, Henderson did not participate in the proceedings. And yet,

there he sits in jail, just like his buddy, paying for his stupidity, if not his crime, for the rest of his life.

The idea for this homily came from one of my students who astutely wrote in her meditation of the Sunday readings this week: Sinning is a lot easier to do when someone initiates it for you. That might be one of the most profound things I have ever read. Let me say that again: Sinning is a lot easier to do when someone initiates it for you. Indeed that is the story of humanity. In our first reading, we can get ensnared in the question of the historicity of Adam and Eve, or we can argue about evolution and the impossibility of talking serpents and the like. But the truth is that we are born into a world where the pull to make really terrible decisions is ingrained and hardwired in our hearts, it is part and parcel of our human experience. There was only one original sin and we are all simply guilty of copy-cat crimes. It is the mob mentality. It is the joy and cruelty of piling on. We learn how to be mean and petty and nasty and clueless and oblivious. We are Russell Henderson, just coming along for the ride, the ride to perdition, the ride to incarceration, the ride to hell.

The question we need to ask ourselves in this first week of Lent is how can that spell be broken? How do we break the long line of dreadful, boneheaded decisions? I would like to share with you two key steps.

First, stop sleepwalking through life. Live life more thoughtfully. I supposed Russell could have done something when McKinney began beating Matthew Shepard, but ask yourself, would you have the courage to stop a drug-addled thug when he was crazed with anger. The opportunity to make the right decision should have occurred earlier that evening, or better yet, years before that evening. Sometimes we step onto a vehicle that is heading for oblivion. We got to realize that the time to make a better choice was when we first decided to take the ride. One wag once said about sexual promiscuity: if you don't want to go to Kansas City stay off the train. Prayer is a solid way to be more reflective and purposeful.

Second, we need to realize that some of our relationships are unhealthy, dangerous, even ghastly dead ends. At times, that can be literally true. I have been working with teenagers for thirty years and I see this over and over and over again. The boyfriend or girlfriend who is abusive or manipulative. The friend who will get you to do anything, often against one's conscience or better judgment. The Aaron McKinney's of our world are out there, like real-life vampires, "good time" guys and gals, ready to suck the life force, the positive energy out of someone. I once taught a girl in Sophomore year. She was always bitter, dark and angry. Her school work was atrocious and her attitude was toxic. Two years later, I went on her Senior retreat and it was as if she had a personality transplant. She was pleasant and happy and was succeeding in school. Always interested in conversion stories, I asked her what happened, how did she get from there to here? She told me flatly: I kicked two people out of my life. Oh... That is a difficult decision

to be sure, but health and happiness trumps a twisted and warped sense of loyalty any day.

Russell Henderson sits in a jail to this day after fifteen long years. He will replay that night on that lonely road in Wyoming for another fifty years or so. He is the poster child for Original Sin in our world. And he will always be, for me at least, a reminder that we need to allow God to conquer in our hearts the awful and perverse initiation and imitation of sin in our hearts, to help us make healthy, productive, life-giving choices.