

Welcome to Lent. About 45 of us were together on Wednesday night, as we were marked with ashes in a sign of repentance and as a sign of our mortality. It is normal in this time of Lent to focus in on things that should be changed about who we are and how we live. So let me remind us of something that must be stated as a starting point for all of this: What do we believe about ourselves, as human beings? Are we just robots? Are we preprogrammed? Are we just animals who live and act due to instinct and wiring? Or are we creations of God who are given enormous and dangerous freedom? Are we given FREE WILL ? Do we get to make choices, every day? I think we would be quick to affirm that we are FREE and that we have free will. That is the way we humans need to be. We need to be free. But with that freedom we need to grow up and make adult good choices. And, since we need to make good choices, we should be concerned about anything that gets in the way of us doing just that.

OK. Now we can get after some things. Is there anything that can get in the way of people making good choices? Are there any dangers out there? Well, I can think of one: what happens if people end up with ADDICTIONS? For example, if a person becomes addicted to heroin, and has his or her brain rewired so that they can no longer make a good choice, that unfortunate heroin addict will choose heroin over food, water, love, and shelter. The addiction will have control. When that happens, the human no longer has the freedom they are supposed to have. So this Lent I would like us to explore some addictions that our nation in particular experiences. We have a cover-picture of a book from 2011 that I read back then, and it is really something! ADDICT NATION! What is Jane Valez-Mitchell holding on that nice tray? Alcohol, donuts, cigarettes, cash, a gun, pills, fast food, sugar, a smart phone, and disposable

everything! This only represents a bit of our problems and addictions. But I intend to help us cover some big ones between now and Easter Sunday, with hopes that we can try, bit by bit to break away from these things.

You can see in your bulletin this morning that each of these Lenten sermons will have the same pre-title: "Fixing the Hole." Why would I pick that? Well, for two reasons: #1, it is almost the name of a great Beatles song, and that is worth a lot right away. But #2, more importantly, lots of counselors and other wise people would suggest that much of our addictions usually find their way back to big holes (or wounds) that are inside of us. We have painful feelings, empty feelings, we have holes in our souls, and we are looking for something to fill those things that we hope will make us complete. Maybe we think that if only we could acquire that special something, that house or car or status or degree or pile of money, or guitar or collection of something, or if we can just drown ourselves in binge-watching our favorite programs, and just fill our lives with being sports fans or something, one day we will fix the hole! We will finally be complete! But many would suggest that the hole in us all is shaped like God, and the things of our world never fit. And we remain empty.

Our topic for today is actually common. What is this addiction? Jane Valez-Mitchell calls it being a "Stargazer." But what is the addiction? She calls it CELEBRITY. I had never connected this word to something else, but it is actually directly connected to the word CELEBRATE. Both Celebrity and Celebrate come from an old Latin verb "celebro" which means *to visit frequently or in great numbers*. Usually there is something there, usually a person, that is the cause of the visiting in great numbers. Someone is the STAR! Someone is the sensation! Lady Gaga! Britney Spears a while back. Madonna!

Michael Jackson. Elton John, the Beatles, Elvis Presley! We want to know what they had to eat, what clothes they wear, every little thing! It is crazy that this morning in our Gospel lesson for the First Sunday in Lent, we see the story of Jesus being tempted by the devil. And what does the devil tempt Jesus to do? **BE A CELEBRITY!**

Could you imagine what would happen if this happened in our time? ***Jesus, throw yourself off the top of the Temple in front of all these people! People will see it! It will be on YouTube and Facebook and Twitter and Instagram! You will be a sensation! They will probably have you on DANCING WITH THE STARS and maybe even American Idol! Everyone will know your name! How great! So, just do it!*** Wouldn't that have made sense, even in Jesus's day? After all, one of the most important things in life is being noticed, and even better, adored! That seems to be what lots of people think these days. But Jesus says **NO** to that celebrity business. He is not going to sing their favorite songs. He will instead ask them to pick up their cross in self denial and follow him. Most people would rather adore the lives of the rich and famous. Right? Look at the crazy shows that are out there today, by the hundreds.

This celebrity thing gets crazy when a person feels unfulfilled in life, but then says "I know... I am going to live through my shining star!" My great star person will make me forget about me, and instead I will pretend that I am that other person. And my hole will be fixed! We adore someone, we want to be that person, we pretend how great it would be, we want to live through the other person. People do this with rooting for sports teams, when they go too far. They do this with rooting only for the winning teams! They root for the winning person.

I read the craziest thing the other day about our crazy culture: in 2007, which was Season 6 for AMERICAN IDOL, something crazy was happening in which one contestant was really bad but dressed wildly or something, and kept winning. One woman was so angry about what was happening on American Idol that she went on a hunger strike! This became a big news item for some people! And then there is this quote in our Addict Nation book:

“Gandhi went on a hunger strike to protest British rule in India. Suffragettes endured hunger strikes in their fight for women’s right to vote. And, in early twenty-first century America, we have devolved to holding a hunger strike to protest a contestant on American Idol... But where is our addiction to junk celebrity leading us as a culture?”

Wow. I just want to go home and watch more of Lindsay Lohan, or Paris Hilton, or the Kardashians, so I can fill my life with something meaningful!

We all get to make choices about the things that fill our lives. But we have to ask about the quality of those things. And being addicted to Celebrity doesn’t seem like a good way to live. Our lives must mean something: what is the source of that meaning? Are we filling our lives with good things? Believe it or not this author has a comment that is pretty good. She writes

“Like all addictions, our fixation on celebrity is the result of spiritual bankruptcy. We are trying to fill a void within ourselves by either puffing ourselves up into something we’re not or becoming obsessed with someone we consider above us.”

Since this is just the first look at cultural addictions in our nation, let me close with a different approach altogether. It is the question of the Sabbath. 29 years ago a Rabbi came to the

church I served and talked about the Sabbath. I will never forget what he said. He basically said that he has learned to keep the Sabbath in order to be set free from things that would control him and enslave him. In Deuteronomy 5 in the 10 Commandments it says ***“Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you... Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there...”*** Why should people observe the Sabbath? Because the Israelites were enslaved. God rescued them from that. But then how can you now show that you are not enslaved? Well, on one day you don't do the things you do on other days. You take 24 hours (the Sabbath) which you dedicate to God, and you simply break free from your crazy schedule, and you break free from the things that normally control you. I love this idea! At least once a week, if only we could break loose of what we usually do, we could take some time to ask ourselves “Is this really a good thing? Should my life be filled with this?” But if we do not make a day of rest for God a priority, they all become the same. And we cannot even make time to ask whether the things that fill our lives are worthy of that or not. If we want to guarantee that our lives are filled with addictions that we cannot control, just keep yourself so busy that you never have a chance to question yourself about the things that fill your life!

Jesus could have been a big celebrity many years ago. He could have been famous and popular. But instead he chose to obey God, and people turned against him. Maybe people will turn against us if we decide we want our lives to be filled with something better. But may we be people whose lives are filled with substance and purpose, people who make a difference for the good of us all. May God bless and guide us as we make our way through Lent this time. AMEN.