



Stop Kicking Yourself



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

March 10, 2019
The First Sunday in Lent

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/2019-03-10-AWW.mp3>.

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Back when my wife, Susan, and I were first married, it was our responsibility to visit with my paternal grandfather. He lived in a nursing home about 15 minutes away from us, and there was no other family nearby, so it fell on us to see him.

Susan and I were both working at the time, and our lives were pretty busy, though looking back, I can't remember why: we didn't have any kids at the time; we didn't have any commitments, other than work; and, we had the weekends all to ourselves. Still, it felt like we always had a lot going on, and so we would visit my grandfather when we could.

I can't tell you how much those visits meant to him. His room was quite small, so Susan and I would sit on the bed, while my grandfather sat in his wheelchair, and the three of us would talk and talk and talk. Actually, Susan and I did most of the talking, because my grandfather always wanted to hear about us and the things we were doing. So, I would tell him about the markets and what was happening. Then, Susan would talk about her latest project. That's when my grandfather always lit up. He was an engineer like Susan, and he really liked hearing about her work, right down to the smallest of details. He would sit there in his wheelchair, with a big smile on his face, soaking in every word Susan was saying.

After each visit, Susan and I would get back in the car and tell ourselves we needed to visit more often – it meant so much to my grandfather. But then, we would get home and become wrapped up in all we were doing. Before we knew it, visiting my grandfather just slipped our minds – days would go by, and then weeks.

One time, after a period like this when we hadn't seen him in a while, we decided to visit on the upcoming weekend. "We've got to go," we told ourselves. "We've got to go."

Saturday morning came, and we woke up and made breakfast. We were getting dressed and ready to leave, when the telephone rang. It was the nursing home. My grandfather had died that morning.

To this day, I still kick myself over what happened. Why didn't we go visit my grandfather sooner? Why didn't we go more often? It didn't take that much effort. It didn't really take any time. We weren't really that busy. Those visits meant so much to my grandfather, and now, he was gone. Why didn't we go?

Sister Joan Chittister, a well-known author and spiritual guide, writes, "We're all human, imperfect by nature... and we will find our way through life one fall at a time."¹

We all know the truth to that statement. All of us are going to fall and make mistakes and miss opportunities. We've done it before, and we'll do it again. Not that we want to be that way, because we don't, but sometimes, we just can't help ourselves. There are times in life when we come up short of who we are and who want to be. We come up short of who God hopes we will be.

So, all of us end up kicking ourselves, over something we've done or left undone, something we said or didn't say. Maybe we could have been a better parent, a better spouse, a better child. Maybe we spent too much time focusing on work and not enough time with our family and friends, telling the people we love most in this world how much they really mean. Or, maybe we wish we had taken more risks, tried something new, tried something different, pursued some dream we always had.

Whatever it is, we look back and ask ourselves: *Why didn't I? Why didn't I do it? Why didn't I say it?*

¹Joan Chittister, *Following the Path*

And, we think to ourselves: *If only I had. If only I had, everything would have been different. Everything would have been better. If only I had.*

We can't really help thinking this way. It's part of our human nature. Feelings of shame and remorse have a way of following us around. Even if we try to hide from them or push them aside, those feelings have a way of finding us and haunting us. We wish we could go back and fix what was broken, right what was wrong, do it all over, and yet, we know we can't go back. As much as we might like, there's no turning back the clock, and so we're stuck with these thoughts of what might have been, or what could have been.

Sometimes, it's so bad that we can't fall asleep at night. We get so wrapped up, kicking ourselves and beating ourselves up, that it affects our mood and our outlook. We get stressed and anxious, grouchy and irritable, to the point where other people don't want to be around us. Whatever it is that happened in the past, we can't let it go, we can't move on – it's still with us, upsetting us and our relationships, disrupting our present and our future...

.... which brings us to the season of Lent.

In the early church, Lent was a time when new Christians prepared for baptism, and when other Christians, who had fallen away from the church because of their sins, recommitted themselves to God through self-examination and repentance. Just as Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness preparing for his ministry, the early Christians observed the season of Lent through prayer, and fasting, and self-denial. For them, it was forty days of getting ready, forty days of learning, forty days of growing, forty days of focusing on God and nothing else. It was an opportunity for those early Christians to make a new start.

For us, the season of Lent is the very same thing. It's a time for us to look inside and take stock, a time for us to acknowledge our mistakes and missed opportunities, a time to consider who we are and who we hope to be. And, it's a time for us to admit that we need God. We need God's help. We need God's strength. We need God's love, because, when we realize we're not all we hope to be, when we realize we're not perfect and sometimes fall short, we realize our need for forgiveness, and healing, and wholeness.

This inward journey isn't an easy process. Looking at ourselves in the mirror and being honest with ourselves about who we are is hard. Who here likes to admit they made a mistake? Who likes to say I screwed up – I could have done better. It's so much easier to point a finger at another person, to put the blame on someone else.

But, if we are willing to try, we won't go through the journey alone. Jesus will be with us. It may feel like we're wandering through the wilderness, vulnerable and alone, not knowing what to expect, not knowing what lies ahead. But, Jesus has been through the wilderness, and he will be with us, showing us the way, helping us to learn and grow, to discover new things about ourselves, and to become that person we always hoped we would be. It can be a new start, for all of us.

Traditionally, people give something up during Lent, as a sort of a visible, tangible way of showing a commitment to making that new beginning. They'll give up alcohol, or chocolate, or even social media. But, this year, how about we give up kicking ourselves over something that happened in the past? How about giving up something that we haven't been able to let go? Instead of focusing on what might have been, or what could have been, focus on what can be. Focus on the here and the now and on the future. Bring whatever emotional burden you're carrying to church and lay it at the altar. Say: here you go, Lord. I made a mistake. I screwed up. I'm not perfect, and I need your help. Help me be the kind of person I want to be. Help me live the kind of life you want me to live. I'm ready, and I'm willing.... to make amends, to change my ways, to make a new start.

Amen.