

Lent I, Year B - February 18, 2024

**"Sin Chilis"**

ST. THOMAS' EPISCOPAL CHURCH

ST. PETERSBURG, FL

Genesis 9: 8-17 • Psalm 25: 1-9 • 1 Peter 3: 18-22 • Mark 1: 9-15



There are a series of stories that my old college chaplain used to tell about a Middle Eastern folk hero named Mulla Nazrudin. You've heard at least one before. This is another one of them.

*Mulla Nasrudin, as everyone knows, comes from a country where fruit is fruit and meat is meat and curry is never eaten. One day he was plodding along a dusty Indian road having newly descended from the high mountains of Kafiristan when a great thirst overtook him.*

*"Soon," he said to himself, "I must come across somewhere that good fruit is to be had."*

*No sooner were the words formed in his brain than he rounded a corner and saw sitting in the shade of a tree a benevolent looking man with a basket in front of him. Piled high in the basket were huge, shiny, red fruits.*

*"This is what I need," said Nazrudin. Taking two tiny coppers from the knot at the end of his turban he handed them to the fruit seller. Without a word, the man handed him*

*the whole basket, for this kind of fruit is cheap in India and people usually buy it in smaller amounts. Nasrudin sat down in the place vacated by the fruiterer and started to munch the fruits. Within a few seconds his mouth was burning, tears streamed down his cheeks, fire was in his throat. The Mulla went on eating. An hour or two passed and then an Afghan hillman came past.*

*Nazrudin hailed him, "Brother! These infidel fruits must come from the very mouth of Sheitan!"*

*"Fool!" said the hillman, "Hast thou never heard of the chilis of Hindustan? Stop eating them at once or death will surely claim a victim before the sun is down."*

*"I cannot move from here," gasped the Mulla, "until I have finished the whole basketful."*

*"Madman! Those fruits belong in curry. Throw them away at once."*

*"I am not eating fruit anymore," croaked Nazrudin, "I am eating my money."*

The story is funny and recognizable because of its truth. We do this, don't we? We eat the whole basket of chilis. An easy mode of interpretation of this parable assigns to the chilis the role of our dumb decisions. We do something or say something less than smart and we have done it in front of somebody else, maybe even in a very public way. And so, in an effort to save face (because little

is as embarrassing as having to admit a mistake, right?) we double down on the dumb thing. What it feels like to us, even if painful, is that we're sticking to our guns and not letting others see that we're fallible. What it looks like to others, though, is that we continue to sit there munching on flaming hot peppers. Now, you tell me which one is dumber. The sin of pride tastes like the flaming chilis of Hindustan.

There is, however, another mode of interpretation of this parable, but it's a little more challenging. Sometimes the mistakes we make are more than mistakes. Sometimes they're sins. And so another way to hear the story of the chilis is to understand that the chilis are really sins. Like all sins, they are dressed up in pretty colors and look oh so appetizing, but just underneath they are uncomfortable, dangerous, and can even burn us. Sometimes, when we start down that path of temptation, we don't know the way out. We can think, like the Mulla did, that if we just eat one more, we'll be that much closer to the bottom of the basket. But what the devil doesn't want you to know is that basket is bottomless. There will always be another chili, another temptation. Before you know it, you've made yourself sick. You've made yourself sick, your mouth is on fire, and you don't know how to stop consuming.

One of the things Jesus was most concerned about in his ministry (you might even say it was the main thing) was repentance. Now we don't like to hear about that very much, at least not in the Episcopal Church. We don't want to talk about repentance, I think first and foremost, because it involves our admitting that we are doing something unhealthy, damaging, and wrong. We are so prideful that we hate admitting that we are wrong. I know you know that I'm talking about - he said to himself, too. But Jesus wasn't interested in our repentance so that he could shame us, so that he could stand us on the street corner and point and us and laugh at us and say to our closest friend, "Can you believe what he just admitted?!" Jesus is interested in our repentance because he knows that what we're doing is damaging ourselves and others we love. He knows that what we are doing is bringing pain into this world. And he does not want us to hurt ourselves. He does not want us to hurt others. He does not want us to hurt our world. He wants all that to stop so that it will all go well for us. Stop eating the sin chilis because they're hurting you and Jesus doesn't want to see you hurt! In Christ, you do not have to eat your money. Christ wants to take the basket of chilis off your hands. He has his arms outstretched to you and says,

“give the basket to me. You don’t have to finish that. I will take it.” Jesus is interested in repentance because Jesus loves you and doesn’t want you to hurt.

Lent is a time to think about sin and repentance. Lent is a time to have a good, long, hard look in a mirror and ask yourself, why am I still eating these hot peppers? In the Rite One service of Eucharist we get to hear what have long been called the “Comfortable Words” – they come right after the Confession and Absolution. One of them is from the first letter of John and it goes like this: *“If anyone sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the perfect offering for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”* Every single time we reach into our basket of hot peppers to take another painful, fiery bite we have Jesus we could turn to and say, “Jesus, I’m done. I’m through with this. Take this away from me.” If we don’t let our pride get in our way, if we don’t let our fear of being shamed get in our way, if we don’t let our stubbornness get in our way, we can say “Jesus, take this away from me.” We don’t have to pretend anymore. We don’t have to put on the brave face anymore. We don’t have to eat our money anymore. Jesus is the perfect offering for our sins. Jesus is our advocate. Jesus is in front of you, holding out his hands for your basket. This Lent, the decision is yours. Amen.