How many of us are fans of the old 60’s TV show, “Gilligan’s Island.” I remember, as a child running home to watch the show. We all know the opening song. And yes, we can remember the characters as well.

I frankly am not too sure how sophisticated the writers of the show were, but if you think about it, all seven characters play off of each other perfectly. It was one of my favorite shows as a kid. No, I did not like it more than the Honeymooners or the Jackie Gleason show, but I did like it a lot. If you think about it carefully, each of the characters represents one of the Seven Deadly Sins of the Holy Roman Empire.

There is Gilligan. He represents sloth. The skipper too, he was wrath or anger. Ginger exuded lust. Thurston Howell the third symbolized greed. Lovey, Ms. Howell was gluttony. The Professor was smart but symbolized pride and finally Mary Ann, my personal favorite was envy, always playing second fiddle to everyone else. Watch the show, and you will see all of the sins absolutely destroying each other. When they are close to being saved, Gilligan’s laziness thwarts their efforts. The professor, somehow able to make a radio out of coconuts can’t seem to patch the boat? He tended to overanalyze everything. In a fun way, Gilligan’s Island subtly told us that a lack of character led the shipwrecked passengers to a never-ending cycle of despair and disappointment.
The only thing that would have saved our ship wrecked fools lay within them, but they totally lacked it. And that was character.

So maybe, we are all on an island, trying to save our families and ourselves, but we keep destroying ourselves. Consider our leaders in Washington. Their own hubris, envy and indolence ends up doing more damage to their efforts than any external enemy could.

As for ourselves? Our cultural values are shifting. Some for the better, much for not. Here’s a good example of change. I remember going into the drug store when I was a child and it was very different from today. First of all, I remember a soda counter in the back where I could always get my cherry coke served by a person, not a machine. But think about the layout of the drug store then and now. Back in the sixties, Cigarettes and matches were out front and birth control was behind the counter. Now, it's the other way around, and that tells us a lot about our priorities.

On the negative side, allow me to talk about our lack of humility. We have moved from a culture of humility to one of pride and boastfulness. David Brooks in his recent book, The Road to Character writes about a recent experience listening to the radio in his car, “I listened to a rebroadcast to Command Performance, which was a variety show that went out to the troops during World War II. The episode I happened to hear was broadcast the day after V-J Day, August 15, 1945. The episode featured some the eras’ biggest celebrities: Frank
Sinatra, Marlene Dietrich, Cary Grant, Bette Davis, and many others. But the most striking feature of the show was its tone of self-effacement and humility. The Allies had just completed one of the noblest military victories in human history. And yet there was no chest beating. Nobody was erecting triumphal arches. “Well, it looks like this is it,” the host, Bing Crosby opened. “What can you say at a time like this? You can’t throw your skimmer in the air. That’s for run-of—the mill holidays. I guess all anybody can do is thank God it’s over.’ The mezzo-soprano Rise’ Stevens came on and sang a solemn version of “Ave Maria,” and then Crosby came back on to summarize the mood: “Today, though, our deep-down feelings is one of humility.”

That sentiment was repeated throughout the broadcast. The actor Burgess Meredith read a passage written by Ernie Pyle, the war correspondent. Pyle had been killed just a few months before, but had had written an article anticipating what victory would mean: “We won this war because our men are brave and because of many other things—because of Russia, England, and China and the passage of time and the gift of nature’s materials. We did not win it because destiny created us better than all other people. I hope that in victory we are more grateful than proud.”

Of course, the nation celebrated with wild parties on the street with drunken sailors. The streets of New York’s garment district were five inches deep in confetti. But overall the move was one of humility and circumspection. The
Command Performance reflected the reality of war. We had witnessed the Holocaust, the Atomic bomb and death of millions. Their collective impulse was to warn themselves against pride and self-glorification. They resisted the natural human tendency toward excessive self-love.”

Brooks continued, “I arrived home before the program was over and listened to that radio show in my driveway for a time. Then I went inside and turned on a football game. A quarterback threw a short pass to a wide receiver, who was tackled almost immediately for a two-yard gain. The defensive player did what all professional athletes do these days in moments of personal accomplishment. He did a self-puffing victory dance, as the camera lingered. It occurred to me that I had just watched more self-celebration after a two yard gain that I had heard after the United States won World War II.”

We are moving away from faith, which focuses our gratitude on God to a celebration of the self, which says, “Nobody is better than me.”

Between 1948 and 1954, psychologists asked more than 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be very important person. At that point, 12% said yes. The same question was revisited in 1989, and this time it wasn’t 12% but 80% of boys and 77% of girls. Did you know that there is a narcissism test? It measures the degree to which people are focused only on themselves. The median score has risen 30% in the last two decades. A whopping 93% of young people agree with the statement, “I am an extraordinary person” and “I like to look at my
body.” Our kids are getting bombarded with lines like, “trust yourself,” “You are special,” “Be true to yourself, as if the self is the sole arbiter of right and wrong.”

Everything from Pixar and Disney Movies to college commencement speeches is constantly telling our children how wonderful they are. One recent speech to the graduating senior class was laced with the same clichés: Follow your passion. Don’t accept limits. Chart your own course.” I wonder, what is left of the box, when everyone is told to think outside of the box? It is not our children’s fault for this shift, but rather the culture and the lessons they are learning from us. This shift should be laid at our feet.

Along with the rise in self-admiration, there has been a tremendous increase in the quest for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life’s ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life’s goals, fame ranked fifteenth out of sixteenth. By 2007, 51% of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals. In one study, middle school girls were asked with whom they would most like to have dinner. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus came in second and Paris Hilton third. Here is something amazing. When girls were asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many said they’d rather be a celebrity’s personal assistant, like Justin Bieber’s than the president of Harvard.

What’s the matter with quietly living a life of humility and responsibility? George Eliot’s novel, Middlemarch celebrates a character, Dorothea who was
never famous, yet somehow lived a life that mattered. This is Eliot’s final word on her, “Her full nature … spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

It’s one of the most beautiful passages in literature, and it encapsulates what a meaningful life is about. It’s not about being famous, but about contributing to something beyond the self, in whatever humble form that may take.

In her hit book, *Eat, Pray Love*, Elizabeth Gilbert wrote that God manifests himself through “my own voice from within my own self…God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.” No demands…. no humility. According to Gilbert, whatever I think is Godly. “Whatever I do is Godly, because God is me exactly as I am.” Bunk!!

Returning to the image of Gilligan’s Island again…. sin is what paralyzes them. And today, we no longer even use the word sin. To many of us, it reminds us of the religious fanatic on the street corner yelling at us to repent. But the word needs to be reclaimed. The word, sin is a necessary piece of our mental furniture because it reminds us that life is a moral effort. When we replace words like sin, with error or try to banish words like virtue, character, evil and vice, we deprive ourselves of a moral compass that is necessary to live a meaningful life. In fact, one
thing that drives me crazy is that fewer people even know how to say, “I’m sorry.” What do they say? “My bad.” I realize the phrase may be generational, but I still don’t like it.

Without the language and compass of morality, we become selfishness, and use other people as a means to get things for ourself. We become prideful and see ourself as superior to everybody else. We ignore and rationalize our own imperfections and inflate our own virtues. And we get angry whenever our needs are not met. In fact, it leads to all of the seven deadly sins.

We come here today to confront our sins. This is not a day for torpor or slumber but for serious reflection. It is my hope that we become moral warriors confronting our own sins and wrestling with our higher values. We need days like today to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do it right and to find ourselves in a place where everyone else is in the same boat.

In Hebrew, the word for sin is Cheit. It means to miss the mark. Its roots are in archery. A cheit is when you miss the mark. And the correct response is to feel guilt. A person who feels no guilt for their transgressions is a socio-path. Guilt is not the enemy, here. It keeps us honest and on the right path. “Teshuvah” or repentance means to return or to refocus one’s aim. So to sin is when we miss the moral mark and teshuvah is when we get it right. We are not born into sin. There is no Original Sin. We do not inherit it from our ancestors in the bible or otherwise. But sin exists and we see it everywhere.
Wasn’t it a sin to run over that poor woman in Charlottesville? Or was that just something that we didn’t like? No…it was a sin and we need to call it out for what it is.

If we are going to rebuild our character and our culture, we need to start here and now. Respectfully, I’d like to offer a few tips.

· Know your weaknesses.

· When ethics and other values conflict, choose ethics.

· Treat all people with kindness and understanding “that they, like you, are created in the image of God.”

· Be fair.

· Be courageous.

· Be honest

· Be grateful

· Practice self-control.

· Exercise common sense.

Be Humble

· Admit when you have done wrong, seek forgiveness and don’t rationalize bad behavior.

Find a hero to emulate.

Allow me to tell you about one of my moral heroes. He was not famous…. he did not write any books, he did not reason a new theology for the Jewish people
but in George Eliot’s words, the growing good in the world rests on this man, who lies in an unvisited tomb. Rabbi Leo Baeck was an undistinguished Reform rabbi in Berlin before the Holocaust. He spent his life teaching, preaching and comforting. When war was on the horizon, and he was almost seventy years old, he was offered the pulpit of the largest synagogue in Cincinnati, Ohio. But he knew what was coming and refused to leave his congregation and community. He traveled tirelessly to London to attempt to save some of his children by having them sent to Great Britain. Ultimately he was arrested and sent to Theresienstadt. There by day, he had to drag a garbage cart through the streets. But at night, he gave illegal lectures on Jewish philosophy, Jewish history and Jewish literature. He offered hope to the hopeless, comfort to those bereft and faith to those who most needed it. He wrote on one of the scraps of paper: “a mensch remains a mensch even in Theresienstadt.”

Not fame…. not arrogance…. character.

General George Marshall challenged us: The measure of life, after all is not its duration, but its devotion.” Modern Maturity magazine chides us with: “The world is full of two types of people: the givers and the takers. The takers eat well - but the givers sleep well.” Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav wrote, “Your education is a failure no matter how learned you are – if it has failed to open your heart. What is necessary for us in life is not to have a symbol, but to be a symbol.

I have a little exercise; I’d like you to try with me. Whenever you say a prayer or make a comment about yourself, do a search and replace, as if you were writing
on your computer. Search for every time you use the word “me or I” and replace it with “we or us.” If we do that simple task, we just might overcome the self-centeredness of our era. And let Beth Or help to lift you up. Help the victims of Harvey and Irma. Have you noticed that in our prayers we are called to “Lift up the fallen. Feed the hungry. House the homeless. Heal the sick. Free the captive.” Have you noticed that this directive usually ends with freeing the captive. Well maybe we are the captive. We are imprisoned by our own sin. And the way out…is by turning out.

We are all on Gilligan’s Island. We can be lazy like Gilligan, impatient and angry like the Skipper; we can be arrogant as the Professor, envious like Maryanne and lustful as Ginger. We can be greedy like Mr. Howell and gluttonous like Ms. Howell. But there is hope. Did you know that the theme song for the show changes during the show. The opening credits have one set of verses while the closing credits have different verses. (I know what your thinking…. I have to get out more). (So join us here each week my friends…) But it’s true. We can change the lyrics of our lives. We can be set free…We can get off the island….we can free the captive. How? “Teshuvah (repentance), prayer, (awareness), and finally, tzedakah (giving of oneself to overcome egotism). In short, faithful character alone can save us.