In High School English class, we had to read John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. I think this was supposed to be some sort of penance for how we California Farmers treated the Okies during the dust bowl migration. I found the book to be self-important and populated with one-dimensional characters and strawmen, but enough of my literary criticism and back to my point. There is a scene in the book and I will surely get the quote wrong because I have not read it since the Reagan administration but it takes place early on when the Joads and all their kin are still in Oklahoma. Caterpillar tractors have arrived to bulldoze someone’s land. I can’t remember why they were bulldozing it and I’m not even sure Steinbeck knew why -- that was another one of my problems with the book. But sorry back to my point. As they are bulldozing one of the displaced farmers complains to the driver of the tractor. The driver of the tractor takes no responsibility for what he is doing and, in his defense, says, “it’s not me it’s the machine.” I am not sure anyone would ever mount such a defense but this is Steinbeck so we don’t let realistic characters get in the way of the point he wants to make. And that point was that people were refusing to take responsibilities for their own actions, but rather sluffing it off onto machines. Now just because I doubt the realism of such a conversation it does not mean that I doubt the impulses behind such a conversation. When something goes wrong, we like to find someone or something, besides ourselves, to be held responsible for our own actions – it wasn’t my fault it was the was the big shots over at the bun company. And we see something like this in the Old Testament Lesson. The Israelites have escaped from Egypt passing through the Red Sea and are on their way to the promised land but today they hit a snag. We read, “The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.’” Do you see what the author of Numbers did there? In the way the story is presented the children of Israel were basically good and noble; it was just the rabble that stirred up trouble. Everyone else was minding their own business until this rabble came along and got them all worked up. And they must have been very persuasive rabble because a short while later we read, “Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents.” I mean in just a few sentences we went from just the rabble to everyone weeping, which makes me think that perhaps everyone had a part to play in this pining for the supposed good old days when they were in slavery in Egypt.

And of course, it is not just the author of Numbers who does things like this. We all like to tell ourselves stories where we are good and noble, without a trace of malice. Things that go wrong are not our fault they are someone or something else’s fault. In *The Grapes of Wrath,* it was the machine. In the Book of Numbers, it’s the rabble. There are probably a lot of psychological reasons for why we do this and we can also use the church answer that we do this because we are miserable sinners, but as much as I enjoy dwelling on our sinful natures, I don’t really want to spend time today on the why but rather on the what. That is what happens to us when we convince ourselves that our wrong actions are somehow the responsibility of someone or something else, and more specifically what happens to our relationship with God when we refuse to admit that we might be responsible for our bad behavior?

There is a cliché that goes around now and then which says, “Christianity is not a religion, it’s a relationship.” And while the statement is not true because the two words are not mutually exclusive, I am somewhat sympathetic to what it is trying to get at. It is trying to inform us that Christianity is more than a set of rules or sacred writings but is rather a living thing. And the living part of it is our relationship with God. It is organic like the relationships we have with our fellow humans. Because I tend to enter things backwards I think that it might be useful to see an example of what relationships are not to better understand what they are. So let’s get in the WABAC Machine and go to the time before Covid when we had to go through toll booths in Illinois so as to be given the pleasure of driving on their safe and relaxing freeways. There were rules we had to follow. We pulled up to the window, we handed the toll booth person our money, they looked unhappy and annoyed and then they gave us our change. I am pretty sure that in all of the times I was blessed by having to give the state of Illinois money, I never once developed a relationship with any of the toll booth workers because there was simply no room for it. Relationships are fluid and require unscripted interactions. When there are a set of rigid rules that can’t happen. But while our relationships cannot be completely controlled by rules, there is one rule which must be followed for any relationship to develop and thrive and that rule is we have to be honest.

For example, if when Amy and I had met I had told her in describing myself that “I liked piña coladas and gettin' caught in the rain” our relationship would have gone nowhere because it was not based on reality but rather on a treacly song from the late 70’s. Amy would not have been developing a relationship with me but rather with Rupert Holmes. Similarly, if we are trying to develop a relationship with God and we tell God that we are perfect, never making mistakes then we are never going to deepen our relationship or our faith because God will not be dealing with us but a made-up version of ourselves. If Jesus is “the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” he does not have a whole lot of pioneering or perfecting to do if we claim to already be perfect. And that is what we are doing if when we do something wrong we declare that it is really someone else’s fault. We are very funny creatures often fastening ourselves to a lie in order to not admit something about ourselves.

Once when I was teaching a kid’s class on Christian history, I was quizzing the kids on what we had gone through in the previous session. I asked if anyone remembered what an indulgence was and after a few moments one kid raised his hand and said, “It is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and all of the saints." I responded by saying, “Really, you just had that definition floating in your head. You are right but next time try to learn it so you don’t have to Google it.” Now the funny thing that happened was the kid kept insisting that he did not look up the definition even though his computer was open and he probably had no idea what temporal punishment meant. It was kind of funny but also there is a problem if he keeps his delusion, he will never actually learn. He will not grow in knowledge. He will not learn how to learn.

Admitting that we are the ones who are wrong and the ones who are in need of change is not easy and it is probably not all that fun. But it is deeply satisfying and deeply comforting because we stop living a lie. I think it was Harry Truman who said, “If you never lie you don’t have to remember what you said.” Living a lie makes more work because we constantly have to pretend that we are something we are not rather than coming to God warts and all and asking him to heal us, so that we may grow in our relationship this day and forevermore.