

On paper, there's no reason *The Office* should be one of the most beloved situational comedies of all time. It's a remake of a British show. It's about, essentially, a cubical farm in smalltown PA. And it's suuuuuuper awkward. Too awkward for some, but not for most of us, apparently, because it ran for 201 episodes over 9 seasons and won almost 30 awards, including Emmys and Golden Globes. And despite having been off the air for almost six years, it remains popular on streaming services and is enjoying an unexpected popularity among high school students.

The Office thrives on awkwardness - and no one is more awkward than Michael Scott, the regional manager played by Steve Carrell. In one of our first interactions with Michael, we learn how highly he thinks of himself - he is the World's Best Boss, and he proved it by buying himself his own mug.

This scene is cringeworthy. We see it and immediately feel awkward.

Of course, Michael isn't the only awkward character in the show. In fact, it seems like most of DunderMifflin's employees are pretty clueless how they come off in the real world. Only a few - Stanley, Pam and Jim - are self-aware enough to turn to camera and give us that knowing look, letting us cringe along with them.

We love to laugh along with Pam and Jim in part because we want to be in on the joke. But I think a big part of the reason the show is so popular is that low-key anxiety we feel that maybe we're NOT Stanley or Jim. Maybe we're Angela or Dwight or Michael.

Maybe we're the person who doesn't know how they come across to others. And maybe we need to laugh about it a little.

Because we don't, as a rule, like awkward situations in real life. It's not knowing what to say to someone when their loved one has just died. Or running into an ex at the store. Or really wanting to become friends with that co-worker but not wanting to risk asking them to grab a drink after work.

Awkwardness is what happens when we see ourselves through someone else's eyes, the moment we realize there's a gap between how we see ourselves in our head and how that person experiences us. We think we're the world's best boss, but everyone else experiences us as an inept idiot.

Now, as we're beginning this morning, a question: why were we designed to *feel awkward*? Why is that an available emotional response to a situation? Since when we feel awkward, our first impulse is to deflect, dismiss or hide, why do we even feel it at all?

Today, we're going to explore how awkwardness is a gift. If we're willing to stay in the awkward, we can learn to see hidden truths about ourselves - hidden from us, of course. Because while we are all masters of self-deception, we can't hide the truth from others, or from God. So awkwardness is a gift that invites us to stay in the moment, cringe, and grow.

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, which is our journey with Jesus toward the Cross and then his resurrection on Easter Sunday. Lent is a season when we turn inward, as God to search our lives, hearts and spirits and point out sin.

Here's my big anxiety about Lent: I'm pretty good at listing the sins I know about. But the older I get, the more I realize I have blind spots. There are sins in my life that I don't know about and frankly those are the ones that worry me. How can I ask God to heal what I am unaware of?

That's why our Lenten series this year is called CRINGEWORTHY: A Theory of Awkwardness. We're building on the work of journalist Melissa Dahl who interrogates the experience of awkwardness, asking why we even feel it.

The word itself comes from Middle English, where it essentially meant "wrong-ward" or "turned in the wrong direction". How do we respond when something is awkward? We cringe.

Dahl describes the cringe like this: "Cringing is the intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment, an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else's eyes. It's a forced moment of self-awareness, and it usually makes you cognizant of the disappointing fact that you aren't measuring up to your own self-concept. -- Melissa Dahl, *Cringeworthy*"

Awkwardness is what happens when we realize we're not really the person we imagine ourselves to be. It's what we feel when we can suddenly see the gap between who we've convinced ourselves we are and who we actually are.

That can only happen when we see ourselves through someone else's eyes. Which is, of course, painful. No wonder we want to skip it. Dahl says, "It's so hard to look at yourself from someone else's point of view when it means taking in the ways you're not measuring up to your own sense of self. But if you can stand it, seeing yourself through someone else's eyes can help you move a little closer toward becoming the person you wish you were. -- Melissa Dahl, *Cringeworthy*"

Awkwardness as "turned the wrong way" is a pretty great definition of sin. It's not a coincidence that the call of the Lenten season is to "repent" - a word that, in both Greek and Hebrew, means "to turn around".

To say that we're sinners is to confess that God has a way we are to walk and we don't walk that way. And our hearts are endlessly deceptive, so we need help to see how we need to repent, to turn around. We need to see ourselves through someone else's eyes.

So there's just no avoiding it: growing spiritually is awkward. Facing our sin is awkward.

But here, Dahl's words offer promise: if we can stand it, seeing ourselves through someone else's eyes can help us move a little closer toward the person we wish we were, the person God created and calls us to be!

That's why, on Ash Wednesday, we began praying together the last lines of Psalm 139:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life. -- Psalm 139:23-24

This is an awkward prayer. We're asking God to search us inside-out, to point out to us any way we're turned wrongly, anything that keeps us from being who God created us to be. We're literally asking for the awkward.

Which means we need to be prepared. Because we don't handle awkwardness well - especially when it comes to our own sin.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to Genesis 3. This is the second creation story, where God has formed humanity from dust, breathed the spirit of life into them. God placed humanity in Eden, a garden with every kind of fruit. There are two special trees - the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The only negative command God has given the man and woman is that they cannot eat from the second tree.

But quickly, we see a talking snake tempt the woman to eat of the tree while the man stands silently watching. The woman eats, then gives the fruit to the man and he also eats.

This is a well-known story, so I want to be careful that our familiarity with the basic story beats don't mask how awkwardness functions, or our natural reactions to it.

Like all of us, the man and woman have a particular picture of themselves as basically good - they are, after all, the prototypical humans. But now they've turned from God's way - they're turned in the wrong direction. And soon enough, God comes looking for them. So how do they react? Let's read together:

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked."

Our first response when we encounter an awkward situation is just to bail. To hide. We don't know how to react, so we just don't. We don't say anything to that grieving friend. We don't ask that question about an important social issue. We don't invite that friend to share a meal.

While we might be able to hide from each other (though not as well as we think, if Michael Scott is any indication), we can't hide from God:

“Who told you that you were naked?” the LORD God asked. “Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?”

And here's where it gets really awkward. You know that feeling when your parents asked you that question they already knew the answer to: "Did you clean your room?" or "What time did you get home last night?" and you're caught like an awkward deer in those headlights.

Who you really are is exposed and who you think you are is shown to be a lie. The man and woman here are not God's faithful children, tending to the garden of the world in the image of their creator. They have turned from God's life-giving way to make their own way, and they've already realized it's not all it was cracked up to be.

So how do they react when the gap between who they think they are and who they really are becomes known? They do what we all do: they get defensive:

The man replied, “It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it.”

Then the LORD God asked the woman, “What have you done?”

“The serpent deceived me,” she replied. “That’s why I ate it.” -- Genesis 3:8-13

Rather than stand in the light of God's truth and allow God to assess them honestly, rather than repent and turn back to God's way, they point the finger, do everything they can to wriggle out of the awkward, to insist that their self-image is correct.

The man says, "I'm not sinful! I'm good! It's this woman YOU gave me who is bad!"

The woman says, "I'm not sinful! I'm good! It's this serpent YOU made who is bad!"

Friends, this response to the awkwardness of having our true selves revealed for all to see is all too relatable. Awkwardness isn't fun, particularly when we're the root of the awkward.

But there's tremendous promise in the awkward. It's only when we realize we're turned the wrong way that we can turn back to God and ask for healing.

People are often surprised to learn what my most awkward moment is, but I've found it really helpful in reflecting on my own blindspots. I love board games. Like probably too much. And I definitely consider myself competitive.

So back in my 20s, when I was a youth and college pastor, I bought a game called Last Word. The basics of the game involve drawing category cards into your hand. Then, when a letter is flipped over, you want to be the first person to throw down your category card and shout out a word from your category that starts with the letter flipped over.

Then a timer starts, and the last person to say a word that begins with that letter wins the point.

So if you get the category "US States", flipping a letter like "D" is amazing because as soon as you say, "Delaware," you get the point, since there aren't any other states that start with D.

A big part of my cut-throat strategy was to brainstorm those limited words.

So I was playing one evening with some friends, and I drew the category "4 Letter Words". I was surprised - not often family friendly games encourage cussing. But hey, I showed up to win, and I would absolutely say a cuss to score that point. As I reviewed the list of known 4 letter words in my head, I realized that there were a few letters that would give me that 1-word kill.

I felt a little weird about shouting a cuss in a friendly board game, but I came to win. So flip that card!

They flipped the letter F.

And I shouted that word, threw down my letter and sat back, arms crossed in self-satisfied victory. The point was mine!

And then one of my friends, with a very confused look on her face, said, "Um... Frog?"

I turned beet red and stammered as the other players began shouting out four letter words that start with F: flip, figs, the word FOUR itself. The timer went off, I lost the point, and the room exploded into laughter when they realized how I had interpreted the card.

But that was the most embarrassed I've ever been in my adult life. I felt so awkward as that timer ticked down. Why?

Because I see myself as intelligent, as a sharp game player, a fierce and intimidating competitor.

And the reality in that moment was that I was kind of an idiot. But more than that, I realized in reflecting on that game that I was too competitive. That there was something inside me that needed to win in a way that would make me think it was a good idea to shout an obscenity at a room full of friends for the sake of 'winning'.

Here's an easy question: which is a more Jesus-like virtue - winning by any means necessary or having fun with friends that deepens community and relationships?

That is not rocket science. It's not PhD level theology. And yet I had allowed my competitive impulse to turn me from God's way.

That was a lot of years ago, and I still love games. But I'm much more careful now about how I play. For me, games are now about deepening relationships. They're a shortcut to community - it's a lot easier to become familiar with strangers when you're playing a game together instead of just staring at one another trying to make small talk, for instance.

But I had to start with a willingness to sit in my own awkwardness and interrogate it. I had to ask God to search me, to point out whatever it was in that experience that kept me from living God's call to be hospitable and kind.

So I want to invite you to reflect on your own awkward moments. When do you discern a gap between who you see yourself to be and how other people see you?

I want to encourage you not to hide from that. Not to get defensive or laugh it off. Instead stay in that awkwardness. Because God wants to heal you and give you life. But we have to repent.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide]

1. When do I feel awkward in the course of my week?
2. How do I usually respond to awkwardness?
3. Am I ready to ask God to show me how God sees me?

Assignment + Blessing

Interrogate your own awkwardness