

OUR ONLY HOPE IS SIN

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A few weeks ago I said it would take more than September 11th to reintroduce the language of sin into our everyday speech. Not that this sermon series will achieve that. But I do hope to get you thinking about sin as it applies to your personal journey of faith. We hear so very little about this lost language of sin and salvation in church.

A generation ago, David H.C. Read, chaplain to the Queen before becoming pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, said the reason we don't hear much about sin from American pulpits is because people aren't interested in being hen-pecked with moral dos and don'ts.ⁱ

Preaching about *sins* instead of *sin*, Christians seem holier than thou.

But Jesus talking about sin didn't exclude anyone. He said why do we worry about the mite in our neighbor's eye and not the log in our own.

C.S. Lewis probes a little deeper. He says we don't hear sin preached about because talking about sin hurts. Before the Good News is good news, says Lewis, it is bad news. Christianity has to preach diagnosis of the human condition before it can preach cure.

We don't like diagnosis. It's why some people will live with life threatening symptoms of disease rather than seeing a doctor. They're afraid of the diagnosis. We tell ourselves we are benevolent and kind. We console ourselves of our other vices by a feeling that "our hearts are in the right place." Yet, the truth about ourselves can be more painful than that.

Lewis notes we have unfortunately come to regard shame as dangerous.

We are told it is healthy to get things out in the open not for the sake of self-humiliation but because we need not be ashamed of what the Bible calls cowardice, un-chastity, falsehood or envy.ⁱⁱ Such things, says the culture, are natural. But there is truth about ourselves that the experience of shame also naturally conveys if we would let it.

Finally, Duke Chaplain Will Willimon says we do not talk much about sin and evil because we don't have the resources to face it.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we anesthetize ourselves from sin and evil. We downplay and downsize sin. We think that time erases our sinful acts or that there is strength in numbers – the more people share a particular vice the less of a vice it is.

But the case I want to make today is that our faith gives us the courage and strength we need to allow a full diagnosis of who we are. I can tell you I have counseled families and individuals over the years not to mention my own experience and found that once a physical or relational problem is diagnosed it is as if a huge burden is lifted. You now have a name for that which you face. You know what you must address to be relieved of your pain. Likewise the language of sin equips us to see the truth about our souls and to turn our lives in new directions of hope and wholeness.

The kind of sin I am talking about is not that hard to define. There has been a lot of consternation in the last decade about what Augustine meant by sin. Some folks figured that his tough childhood, promiscuous young adulthood and domineering mother skewed his reading of Adam and Eve and the serpent. Which in turn skewed our notion of that powerful Biblical myth. I am not interested in side-tracking us by analyzing Augustine.^{iv}

Rather, I like the definitions the Bible uses: sin is missing the mark, sin is rebellion, sin is to act wrongly. Fred Buechner commenting on the experience of sin said it is a centrifugal force: it pushes everything away, out toward the periphery until bits and pieces go flying off until only the core is left. Then the core itself goes flying off in bits and pieces until finally nothing at all is left.

The wages of sin is death is St. Paul's way of saying the same thing.

Sin is whatever we do or fail to do that pushes God, the world, nature, other people, our own best selves away. Religion itself can be sinful if it widens the gap between me and people who don't share my views.^v

Original sin means that all of us are tainted by this nearly biological urge to put ourselves at the center of our lives and sit by while everything else gets displaced: children, marriage, career, personal health.

We talked about the source of sin last week. Evil. My view is not that there are two powers of equal strength good and evil. Rather, there is one good God who gives us freedom to choose. Evil results from that universal decision to place ourselves at the center of everything – an inclination to choose things we know are ruinous even for ourselves. St. Paul said, "I don't do that which I want and do that which I don't want."

Maybe you try, says one writer, when you wake, to lay the new day at God's feet. But before you finish shaving, it becomes your day and God's share in it is seen as a tribute you must pay out of your own pocket. The story of Adam and Eve is about two people who wanted to call their souls their own. Adam and Eve wanted some corner in the universe of which they could say to God, this is our business, not yours. But there is no such corner. The Bible makes clear, we belong to God.^{vi}

If we violate this truth there are consequences. A chess player's freedom to play chess depends on the rigidity of the squares and moves – our ability to participate with choice in this life depends on our honoring the design of creation.^{vii} The essence of sin is going against God's will.

Whether we do that missing the mark, acting wrongly or rebelling we have wandered into a waste land. The consequences we endure, says one preacher, are not God's dumping extra punishment on us as much as it is God telling us we have abandoned the way of life. God is like a divine jujitsu master. God does not set out to hurt us, but spins our rejection of life around so that we can feel the full force of it for ourselves.^{viii}

Freedom to choose. One of the challenges of parenting is learning to allow your child to experience natural and logical consequences of life. Not jumping in to rescue all the time.

A natural consequence is, for example, letting your child receive a failing grade if he or she chooses not to do their homework – rather than rescuing him or her by harping on them or even doing the homework yourself. A logical consequence is taking away the privilege of using the car if there is a failing grade.

Likewise God has designed creation so that we experience the consequences of our actions when we choose to push God or others away. If you don't experience those consequences sooner, mark my words, you'll experience them later. It is the way God designed the world. It is the way the chess board of life is arranged.

So where's the good news? The fact that that which drives our decision-making is often the urge to place ourselves rather than God at the center of our lives, does not mean that we are condemned to live horrible, tortured lives. It means that we can correct our ways, chart a new course, and discover the life God intends.

But – and here's the key – it will not happen until we get sick and tired of being sick and tired. Until the good news first becomes bad news. The news of diagnosis.

And here guilt and shame are our teachers. Not so that we can wallow in despair but rather gain self-understanding and motivation to change.

Poet George Herbert said: “And so my sins ascend three stories high; as Babel grew, before there were dissensions. Yet ill deeds loiter not; for they supply new thought of sinning: wherefore, to my shame, sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.”^{xix}

If we let ourselves, we get to a place finally where we really are sorry. The Chinese symbol for this condition I am told means both crisis and opportunity. When you are sick and tired of being sick and tired you have opportunity. But you won't see opportunity unless your sorrow is sufficiently deep.

I'll never forget a family in a congregation I served many years ago. A member of the family attempted suicide. It was the crisis/opportunity that led to the diagnosis that turned that family around. Deep sorrow cleared the way for change.

I say it will take more than 9/11, more than a sermon series to reintroduce sin into the lexicon of your faith. It will take some event or accumulation of events to bring you to the place at last where your soul is diagnosed.

If we are willing to call some part of us that is killing some part of us sin then we have made a quantum leap in our view of reality.^x We have admitted that something is fundamentally wrong. Not just, “whoops I made a mistake,” or “whoops I violated the law,” or “whoops I really should get some counseling about that issue.” The languages of law and medicine are external to the soul. They do not deal with the fact that something is wrong *within* each one of us.

But the vocabulary of sin describes the soul. It knows there is something rotten in Denmark. It acknowledges we are responsible for the way things are. Not parents, not bosses. But you and I for our own lives.

The danger I have seen and experienced, is we blurt out to someone our newfound self awareness, a day or two goes by, the crisis passes and we look back and wonder what in the world were we thinking.

Yet, once we get to the place of accepting who we are there is another danger.^{xi}

Writer Reynolds Price talks about his experience getting cancer and losing the use of his legs. A profound physical and spiritual crisis. It required a new way of life. But to his great astonishment, it was his friends who resisted most the new life he had to embrace.

It is often our loved ones who are not ready for us to change. “Honey, I know you want to quit your job and spend more time with the kids, but we can’t stay in this house without two incomes. Why don’t you give it six months and see if you still feel the same way in September?” Or this conversation, “Drink too much? I don’t think you drink too much. I think you just know how to have a good time without looking down your nose at other people. If you want to cut back, go ahead, but quit? What would we do on weekends if you quit? Who would our friends be?”

Rather than denying that the old life is gone, what we really need, says Price, is for people to say to us, ‘You’re dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?’ The moment you decide to call the old life sin is the moment you decide *not* to live quietly with your old death-dealing habits and rationalizations. It is the moment also that you decide to invite others to change their way of dealing with you. It is the moment you begin figuring out, with God’s help, who you will be tomorrow.

When we hear the word sin says Barbara Brown Taylor each of us no doubt thinks something different: the stolen candy bar, the rumpled sheets of a bed you shared with someone else’s lover, a large pipe spewing orange sludge into a once-blue river, a clutch of homeless people sitting around a fire built from trash in a vacant lot between two corporate sky scrapers. The pictures, says Taylor, are different, but the experience is the same – sin makes some part of us die.

“All sins,” said Simone Weil, “are attempts to fill voids.” Because we cannot stand the God-shaped hole inside of us we try stuffing it full of all sorts of things. Food, toys, work, drugs. But like the golden slipper in the fairy tale there is only one thing that will fit that space – the presence of God in your life.

When we are ready to honor that empty space instead of trying to fill it with stuff or cover it with distractions, then we are ready to consider what kind of new life God may be calling us to live. The encouraging word from those who have been down this road ahead of us is that there is, ultimately more joy and transformation than remorse and despair associated with this new life God offers.

When Trinity rector Cam Miller heard that I was preaching about sin and asked whether I was for it or against it I told him unequivocally I am for it. Sin is not the enemy. It is the only word – or better, the only language – that can describe our urge to put ourselves at the center of our lives rather than God who summons us to obedience and service.

When we see sin that way we discover new strength to repent and turn back to God which is the subject of the next sermon.

If the church is to be focussed on anything shouldn’t it be the condition of our souls? For if there is nothing fundamentally wrong with us then what need do we have of a Savior? Sin and the awareness that we are sinful people is our only hope. It is the language of salvation. It is the wake-up call that prepares us to let go of death and embrace life. Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ David H. C. Read, Overheard (New York: Abingdon, 1969) 76.

ⁱⁱ C.S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (New York: MacMillan, 1962) 66.

ⁱⁱⁱ William H. Willimon, Sighing for Eden: Sin, Evil, and The Christian Faith (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 134,

^{iv} Elaine Pagels, Adam, Eve, and the Serpent (New York: Vintage, 1988) and The Origin of Satan (New York: Vintage, 1995). Both of these works explore the early church sources for shaping and understanding sin and evil.

^v Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) 88.

^{vi} Lewis, 81.

^{vii} Lewis, 71.

^{viii} Barbara Brown Taylor, Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation (Cambridge, Cowley, 2000) 50.

^{ix} George Herbert, The Complete English Poems, “Sin’s Round” (New York: Penguin, 1991) 113.

^x Taylor, 60.

^{xi} Taylor describes both dangers, refers to Reynolds Price and the response of friends to our new way of life as well as to Simone Weil and the pictures we have of sin. 61, 62.