

The Wages of Sin

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
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Romans 6:12-23

A Garrison Keillor story – sermon began with a cd of Garrison Keillor telling a story about picking tomatoes with and throwing tomatoes at his brother and sister... especially his sister!

His story reminds me of another: A child psychologist was looking over some reports while his little daughter and their neighbor's children played just outside his window. He glanced up just in time to see his daughter give a little boy a violent shove that knocked him to the ground. The psychologist got up from his chair and went to the window, but before he could scold her, his daughter called up to him innocently, "Tell me, Daddy, why did I do that?"

Why indeed? Why is it that we do so many things we know we shouldn't do, say so many things we know shouldn't say, even hurt so many people – often those we most love – whom we never intended to hurt? Like Garrison Keillor holding that big juicy tomato, like the young girl shoving her friend, we all struggle in the battle between good and evil, right and wrong choices, thoughts and actions.

In the words of Barbara Brown Taylor, "Deep down in human experience, there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human experience there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove you can... Missing the mark, getting out of synch with God, with God's will for our lives; getting out of synch with our own best selves... that is the language of sin. And as uncomfortable as such language might make us feel, I'm just not sure we should abandon it or ignore it. Because such language dares to address the darkness within our heart, the darkness in the heart of our world – a darkness we can never fully see or understand, but from which we would very much like to be set free."

Ah yes, the language of sin. As Paul says, in typically stark language, too often we have found ourselves, "slaves of sin."

I suspect that right now, a number of you are thinking, "I came to church today for this? Who talks about sin anymore?" And you would be right! In this part of the world, when it comes to the concept of sin, we are inclined to respond, "Who cares?" Living in what is essentially a sin-denying culture, we prefer to see ourselves as basically good, selfless, caring souls who can be happy and fulfilled if we read the right books, eat properly, exercise regularly and chose to believe that we have all we need for the good life inside of us. I once heard a rather crusty theologian speak of America as the "land of wistful pagans"; the land where people believe that we all have some automatic dose of the spirit, the sacred, the divine, and all we really need to do is nurture and tend it and we will find happiness and fulfillment, we will be able to bring this inner godliness to light, all by ourselves. Is that true?

Well, I certainly am not going to stand here and deny the glow of that inner light, deny that yes, each of us is created in the image of God. And yet, there is also no denying all the nasty imperfections in my life. What about the anxiety, fear, anger, violence and heartache both within us and all around us. If inner-perfection and fulfillment are within my grasp, why can't I grasp them? Why do I so often feel so imperfect? Why are my relationships so imperfect? Why do I so often shoot myself in the foot and fail to achieve even the modest goals I set for myself?

You see, the biblical concept of sin is not about guilt or judgment or even particular behaviors or actions such as lying, stealing, drinking too much, cheating, or rooting for the Los Angeles Dodgers. You might say that, biblically speaking, sin is nothing in particular. Rather it

is a condition – a sense of alienation, disconnection, separation; an awareness of the great distance between who I am and who God created me to be. And I believe it is important to acknowledge that.

A story told by a pastor: “I recently visited an Alcoholics Anonymous group that meets in the basement of a small Presbyterian church. I was there at the invitation of a young man who was celebrating his second year of sobriety. Two years earlier, he almost died when he wrecked his car while driving under the influence. Luckily for him, his sentence included a rehabilitation program and a long period of parole during which he became a member of AA.

“The night I was there, his parents were too, along with his younger brother. For one hour we sat in a room with people who were dedicated to the work of transformation. The young man spoke frankly about his self-destructiveness, his former deception of family and friends, and the strong temptation he sometimes felt to go back to the way things were. The other people in the room nodded knowingly. A few even reminded him of some sordid things he had done that he had left out of his narrative. More than once I wanted to jump up and clap my hands over his mother’s ears, not because anyone was saying anything mean about her or her son, but simply because they were all speaking the truth in her presence.

“She was fine with it. My own response taught me that for all my conscious belief in the transforming power of the truth, I still have an unconscious fear of it. What am I afraid of? That someone will be revealed for who he or she is? That I will be revealed for who I am and that it will not be a pretty sight? And yet the people in that room believe that their lives depend on doing exactly that... If you are an AA member yourself, then you know that is one of the reasons you keep going back: because there are so few places in the world where people agree to tell the truth like that, and where the truth works the miracle of change.” Telling the truth – believing change is possible – believing transformation is possible. Could the church be a place like that?

Paul’s language in our text is blunt, uncompromising and even hard completely to understand as he talks about wickedness, and righteousness and dominion and sanctification. But what I think he is doing is speaking the truth – the truth about the human condition and the truth about the possibility of transformation and new life. Can we recognize the pull of the darkness when it comes, and can we trust that there is another way? Paul understands, as AA understands, that the recognition of sin, of the power of darkness and alienation, may very well be our only hope. For such honest recognition opens us to the possibility of new life, to the power of God’s grace, to the possibility that perhaps the way things are in not the way they must always be. To use Paul’s language, we can be set free – free to begin again.

As I was working on this sermon, the refrain from a Bono – U2 – kept running through my head: “I still haven’t found what I’m looking for. Could it be that the sense of being out of synch, not being quite where we want to be, of looking for something, but not quite sure what, of longing for the scattered and broken pieces of life to be put back together in ways we know we can never do...could all of this be a longing for God? Said the French philosopher, Simone Weil: “All sin is the attempt to fill voids. Because we cannot stand the God-shaped hole inside of us, we try stuffing it full of all sorts of things, but it refuses to be filled. It rejects all substitutes. It is the holy of holies inside of us, which only God may fill.”

And so, with the Apostle Paul and in contrast to what much of the world around us believes, I do not believe the recognition and naming of sin is the enemy it is often made out to be. And again, I’m not talking about guilt, not talking about blame. Rather, such recognition and naming might very well be the first step in a new direction; the recognition of our need for the One who sees us fully – warts and all – and who still believes in us and loves us deeply.