

Feb 26, 2023

Let us pray.

O God of Love, O God of Truth;

Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.

Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.

Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.

O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.

Amen.

The Sin of Sin

John 8:2-11

“Early in the morning, Jesus went to the temple to teach the people who gathered round him. The scribes and Pharisees showed up with a woman who had been caught in adultery. They made her stand before everyone and then turned to Jesus, asking, ‘Rabbi, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. The Law of Moses commands that we stone her. What do you say?’ (Now they did this to trap him, so they might bring charges against Jesus!)

Jesus bent down and with his finger wrote something on the ground. Then straightening up he said, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.’ Then he bent down to the ground again.

When the crowd heard this they dispersed one by one, beginning with the elders, till Jesus was alone with the woman. ‘Woman, no one is here to condemn you. And neither do I. Go your way and sin no more.’”

So this is the 1st Sunday of Lent, “the serious season”.
So let me begin light-heartedly.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class,

“Does anyone here know what we mean by
‘sins of omission’?”

After a bit of silence, one little girl spoke out,

‘Aren’t those the sins we should have committed but didn’t?’”

Actually, I’d like to know what those are?

Because good Lord!, it seems we’re committing plenty
and what’s omitted is moral outrage and consequence.

In fact, the more some politicians sin,
the more popular they become!

At any rate, strictly speaking, “sins of omission”
are those acts of kindness, virtue, justice and love;
we didn’t do but should have.

But this morning,

I want to talk about omission and sin
from an entirely different angle.

In 1973, the famous psychotherapist Karl Menninger,
wrote a best-selling book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*

In it he noted that sin was disappearing;
not the DOING of it, but the conversation ABOUT it.
Especially in liberal churches.

“It’s not comfortable”,

“I don’t like being reminded what I’ve done wrong?”

“It’s too much of a downer”.

Thus many preachers stopped preaching about sin,
& many worship services got rid of
prayers of confession and assurances of forgiveness.

Meanwhile, as progressive Christianity was avoiding sin,
for comfort’s sake,

Fundamentalist Christianity was emphasizing it.

Self-righteously, they filled the void,

making Sin a judgmental dehumanizing battle cry
then carrying their banner into the political arena.

But a renaissance is underway.

More modern liberal theologians,

like Barbara Brown Taylor, are taking a refreshing
new perspective on this touchy subject.

In her book, *Speaking of Sin*, she says,

**“Sin - is the fire alarm that wakes us up
to the possibility of true repentance.”**

She further ponders,

“Why should we speak of sin anymore?

**The only reason I can think of is because we believe
that God redeems the world through us.”**

Thus, more worship services like our own
include prayers of confession & assurances of pardon.

For, what does the love of God really mean
without the reality of sin?

How can Goodness be legit without it's glaring opposite?

How can Love so broadly live without the sin it must forgive?

How can Grace be more than cheap until it faces sin so deep?

How can Jesus reveal God's best without the sin we must confess?

(JHG)

And more congregations like our own
have a renewed interest in Ash Wednesday services
like the one we shared with our friends
at 1st Baptist Church last week
- and have been doing so for the last dozen years.

And more pulpiteers like myself
are willing to preach on the subject!
It reminds me of the friendly banter I used to have
before Sunday worship each week.

A buddy would ask me,

“What’s ya preaching on today?”

And I would respond, **“I’m preachin on sin!”**

And he would say, **“Are ya fer it or agin it?”**

And I would say, **“Agin it, of course!”**

Well today I’m FOR it.

But before you close your liberal ears, let me say,
I’m not “for it” like Jonathan Edwards
in his harsh 1741 sermon,
Sinners In The Hands Of an Angry God.

On the contrary, I want to preach on sin
according to the love of Jesus.

And what we see in this morning's scripture lesson
is Jesus trying to defend sin
from sinful abuse.

And Jesus defends it in 3 key ways.

1st, he tries to de-weaponize sin.

*The scribes & Pharisees showed up with a woman who had been caught
in adultery. They made her stand before everyone and then turned to
Jesus, asking, 'Rabbi, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery.
The Law of Moses commands that we stone her. What do you say?'
(Now they did this to trap him and bring charges against Jesus!)*

How dare they use sin in such a way!

Sin isn't a theological trifle to play around with.

It isn't a game the way the Pharisees used it
to entrap Jesus.

And sin, in its correct understanding,
isn't meant to cause shaming punishment
or motivate murderous stone-throwing by anyone.

Sin should never be a weapon
for anyone's pursuit of power and gain.

But sadly, throughout history
Christianity has indeed weaponized sin.
For centuries it has shamed women,
in order to keep them in their place.

For centuries it has enslaved average Christians in fear.
For centuries it has attacked Gay and Lesbians
shunning them from their churches and families.
And right now, in America,
it has helped create deep and hateful political divisions.

But unbeknownst to the faithful themselves,
weaponized sin has blinded them in hypocrisy.
There's something hidden in our bible story
that we need to uncover.
The Pharisees were breaking their own laws.
In the case of adultery, the Law of Moses demands
that both the man AND the woman
must be judged together.
It takes 2 to tango.
So where's the guy in this story?

Hypocrisy is maximized when sin is weaponized.

A 2nd defense by Jesus
is when he defuses sin of it's condemnation.

Many Christians believe sin is all about condemnation.
Either it will condemn you TO Hell,
or it will condemn them FROM God's love.
But Jesus is clear about this:

'Let anyone among you who is without sin cast the first stone.'
When the crowd heard this they dispersed one by one,
beginning with the elders,
till Jesus was alone with the woman.
'Woman, no one is here to condemn you.
And neither do I.'

Part of the reason sin feels so condemning is because it's presented in such polarizing, uncompromising, angry terms.

But Jesus handles it very differently.

The Greek word for "sin" is *hamartano*

It literally means to "miss the mark".

When archers miss the target, it's said, "They sinned".

That is hardly the condemnation of one's actions as conveyed by fire-and-brimstone evangelists on television.

I have a friend who is an avid bow-hunter.

He invests in the best equipment he can afford.

He studies the wind and his surroundings.

After work, many a day,

he goes out and practices, practices, practices on a target in his back yard.

Jesus handles Sin in a similar way.

He wants all people to learn from their misses.

He wants all sinners to understand their surroundings;

the drugs in the neighborhood,
hanging out with the wrong people,
learning to be a good judge of character,
filtering out the winds of society so our arrow-like lives
aren't blown off course.

And Jesus wants us to practice, practice, practice,
so as to improve their aim
and more consistently hit the target of repentance.
Which is why he said, "*Neither do I condemn you.*"

Because 3rd, and in the final judgment,
Sin isn't about anyone else but you.
The responsibility of sin rests with each of us alone.
Just like our bible story reveals,
no one around to judge us but ourselves.
No one else to blame.
No strangers, no friends, no parents, no family,
no class-mates, no governments, no politicians,
no bad luck.
No one around to throw stones at us so we can
feel like "the victim".
No one else to make amends for our sins
and clean up our lives. Just us and God.

But there is another voice to help.

Another life from which to model our own.
It is the life of Jesus,
informing our conscience, being our guiding light,
leading us to go and sin no more.

In closing, I had a little revelation
at my Ash Wed. service at Equinox Terrace
to do an Ash Wednesday Service.
After I had put the ashes on the foreheads of those
dear and reverent residents,
my own finger was smudged.
It left a black smudge on my white shirt.
It left a black smudge on my kackey pants.
It left a black smudge on pretty much everything,
until I labored - and I mean labored - to wash it off.

And I saw in this a metaphor.
How easily it is for those who mark others in sin
to carry the mark themselves.
To smudge everything and everyone they touch.
The church, ministers, priests and all self-righteous
Christians who love to find sin in others,
must always and forever learn to deal with sin
humbly, reverently, graciously,
in order for sin to be and do
it's intended ministry of repentance.

