

WHAT ABOUT SIN?

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
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Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

Matthew 4:1-11

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, traditionally the church's most important season of penitence, fasting and prayer. To some, Lent means "giving something up"—maybe desserts or television or drinking alcohol. More frequently these days, however, progressive Protestants think not of giving something up for Lent but rather taking something on—something that will deepen our faith during these six weeks as we prepare to celebrate Easter. It might be daily Bible reading or working in a food pantry or cutting back on our own spending so that we can give more to help others.¹

This more modern approach to Lent emphasizes the positive. It encourages us not to wallow in guilt or fear of punishment, but rather to embrace the hard work of transforming our lives—by the grace of God, which not only forgives us our sins but also strengthens us to follow Christ in the startling freedom of new life.

Yet it is a mistake, I think, to skip too quickly over sin. Talking about sin has largely fallen out of favor in the mainline church today. In many quarters it's considered a downer, the sort of thing that puts off potential members. It's more comforting to hear about grace and forgiveness than sin and repentance. Besides, even those of us within the church have a tough time agreeing on what sin is, exactly.

The issue of sin arises because we are all aware that all is not right with the world or with ourselves. There is suffering in the world, and injustice, and all of us fall short of the best that we could be. Trying to understand why, we can blame some of this on so-called "acts of God," but clearly we human beings are primary source of most of what ails us. Our biblical forbears captured this reality poetically in the story of Adam and Eve.² They corrupted the paradise that God had created for them by disobeying God and eating of the forbidden fruit. That was the original sin. And once set loose, that sin has infected the created order ever since. Helpless to heal this situation on our own, we human beings need God to save us from sin.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote a fine book some years ago called, *Speaking of Sin*,³ in which she notes that the old language of sin and salvation—the fire and brimstone preaching of old—has lost its power in recent decades. We modern folk tend to rely instead on the languages of medicine or law to describe the human predicament. For example, if we think in medical terms, the basic human problem is not called sin but sickness, and illness becomes the metaphor for human failing. Sometimes our problems

¹ Leslie Scanlon, "Ash Wednesday: What Do Presbyterians Do?" *The Presbyterian Outlook*, February 7, 2005, 3.

² Genesis 3:1-24.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cowley Publications, 2000).

are caused by bacteria or biochemistry or our genes. Other times they can be traced back to traumatic childhood events. Either way, they cannot properly be called our “fault.” Judgment hardly seems appropriate. Why would God condemn anyone for getting sick?

But the language of law, Taylor says, heads in the opposite direction. From the legalist’s point of view, the basic human problem is not called sin or sickness but crime, and lawlessness becomes the metaphor for human failing. The answer is not medicine but a swift dose of justice. No matter how we grew up, no matter what kind of difficulties we may be having in the present, we are expected to abide by the law, and if we do not, to accept responsibility for our actions. Ethics do not depend upon the situation. There is right and there is wrong—and the wrong will be judged. No small part of the appeal of this model is its belief that we can single out the wrongdoers and put them away, freeing those of us who have not been caught for anything to enjoy a bracing sense of innocence.

The problem, of course, is that neither one of these conceptions of what ails us is adequate. Both the language of medicine and the language of law are too one-dimensional, insufficiently appreciative of areas of gray. The basic human problem, Taylor insists, is not sickness or lawlessness but sin—understood as wrecked relationship: with God, with one another, with the whole created order. Sometimes we cause the wreckage and sometimes we are simply trapped in it. But either way, there is hope. However impoverished our circumstances, however badly we may have been used, we may still choose—for good or for ill—how we will respond to what has happened to us. We may learn how to live with our tragedies, or we may spend all of our time dying from them. We may decide to forgive our enemies, or we may allow them to run our lives by continuing to hate them. In theological language, the choice to remain in wrecked relationship with God and other human beings is called sin. The choice to enter into the process of repair is called repentance, an often-bitter medicine with the undisputed power to save lives.

Importantly, sin is not simply a set of behaviors to be avoided. Much more fundamentally, it is a way of life to be exposed and changed, and no one is innocent. The essence of sin is not the violation of laws but the violation of relationships. What God cares about—what we should care about—is not punishment but restoration of relationship, which means that the focus is not on paying debts but on recovering fullness of life.

It is worth our paying attention to sin, because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again. There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked. How tempting it is for us to accept that lie. A lot of us grind on that way. We tend to our business and trust others to tend to theirs, all the while trying to convince ourselves that this growing ache inside—this sense of being cut off from what really matters—is normal. It is not a sign that something is wrong. It is just a pain to be gotten used to. Call it existential anxiety. Call it the human condition. Call it life.

If, on the other hand, you decide to call it sin, then you have already made a radical shift in your perception of reality. As hard as such a confession may be, it is also a confession of hope—that things may change, that the way they are is not the way they

must always be. The catch, of course, is that this hope begins with some acceptance of your responsibility for the way things are.

The Lenten season invites us to measure the full distance between where we are and where God created us to be—to suffer that distance, to name it, to decide not to live quietly with it any longer, and to begin to discover who we will be tomorrow.

Sin is a name for the experience of being cut off from air, light, sustenance, community, hope, meaning, life. It is less concerned with specific behaviors than with the aftermath of those behaviors. There are a thousand ways to turn away from the light, after all, with variations according to culture, century, class, and gender. The point is to know the difference between light and darkness, and to recognize the pull of darkness when it comes.

Jesus knew how to do that, of course. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus is confronted by darkness in the form of Satan in the wilderness. Jesus is tempted. Tempted by what? We may think of temptation in terms of sneaking an extra piece of chocolate when nobody's looking or doing something we know is wrong because we think we can get away with it. But what's going on with Jesus out there out there in the desert—that howling, bleak, and barren desert, with the burning sun, the cold nights, the forty days of fasting—that was something different, something deeper, something darker. What was it?

Listen to it. Satan asks him, “Why don't you turn the stones to bread?” That is reasonable. He is hungry, the son of God, starved to death. Why not? The devil continues to eat away at him: “After all, you never worked a miracle; you better try one out here in the desert. You might get embarrassed when you are in front of a crowd. Give it a little try. Jump off the pinnacle of the Temple. The scripture says God will protect you; you won't be hurt. The scripture says that. It is in the Bible.” You know, if I did that, it would make a lot of people believe. What is wrong with doing something that will get people to believe? Makes sense to me. The tempter shows him the kingdoms of the world. “These are yours if . . . these are yours if . . .” Wouldn't that have been wonderful if Jesus had said yes and had gained more influence over the social and political nature of our world? I might wish for it. A little more justice and fairness and equality in the world. Makes sense to me.

Jesus is approached and tested at the point of what is reasonable, what is helpful, and what is good. Fred Craddock says fundamentally, temptation is not about the question, “Would you like to do something wrong?” When Adam and Eve were in the garden, the voice of the tempter said, “Would you like to be as God?” The voice did not say, “Would you like to live like the devil? I have a deck of cards and a fifth out here in the chariot.” The voice said, “Would you like to be as God.” What is wrong with that? Isn't that what we are about? Temptation at its deepest level has nothing to do with chocolate fudge or whipped cream. It has nothing to do with that piece of paper you have in your pocket during the test that has all the answers on it. It has nothing to do with that pint of whisky the alcoholic has hidden out in the tool chest in the garage. Jesus' temptation was this: What am I going to do with my life? Real temptation is not a matter of choosing the right and resisting the wrong. It is a matter of asking, what is God's will for me? There is the real test. Jesus had never preached a sermon, never healed anybody,

never taught a lesson. He had not even started his ministry. So Jesus, what are you going to do with the rest of your life? Still wet from his baptism, now he faces it.

Last Wednesday night we had our Ash Wednesday service. Ash Wednesday gets its meaning from “ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” and it is a reflection on our mortality, on the brevity of life. As I was thinking about that service and preparing for the upcoming memorial services of several friends, it occurred to me that, even for those of us who live to be ninety or even a hundred, life is such a brief thing from birth to death. What are you going to do with it? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? That is the task.

This Lent, I am asking you to please ask yourself, what is my life anyway? If you sum it all up, have you decided that your life will have integrity and everything that you do and say will grow from this integrity? The wonderful thing about the gospel is, even if you have never thought about it, it is not too late. And even if you have messed everything up, it is not too late. Ashes to ashes, still wet from baptism . . . Jesus, now what? That is the meaning of Lent, that is the meaning of the gospel, that is the example of Jesus—to die to sin and struggle with the will of God.⁴

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we bend our knees and lift up our hearts, giving glory to God forever. Amen.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, “Tempted to Do Good,” *The Cherry Log Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 13-18.