

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from February 4, 2007

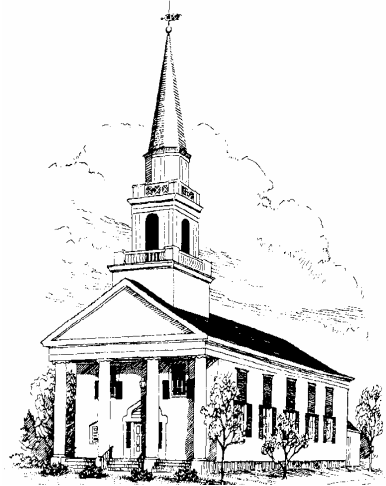
Rev. Patricia L. Liberty

“Sin ...”

Scriptures:

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11



At my home church, when we say the Lord’s Prayer, we don’t say “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors”. We say, “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” Our pastor recently approached the board of deacons and said, “I’d like to change that. I’d like to go from ‘forgive us our *sins*’ to ‘forgive us our *sin*’.” Well, little did he know that the place was about to come unhinged.

It basically brought to question everything that people believed or, at least, thought they believed about sin. It was so much easier when it was “debts” and “debtors”. It so much more innocuous. But from Pastor Paul’s perspective, “we think of ‘sins’ as this laundry list of things, most of which we don’t do anyway but if we confessed them, it makes us feel better about the things we do do. But if we just talk about ‘sin’ and ask for forgiveness for ‘sin’, we come closer to acknowledging all that alienates us from God.”

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said the Christian doctrine of sin was about the only self-evident doctrine we had. That is, even if you don’t believe in God, even if you didn’t make better than a D in Western Civilization, you could still see the reality of human sin.

It’s not one of those things that we like to talk about. It makes us fairly uncomfortable. But my time here is limited so I figured, “Why not?” Whatever happened to sin anyway? We think of different religious traditions. The fundamentalists, the Pentecostals, the televangelists, and the fire-and-brimstone preachers are all on one end and at the very other end is that notion of “sin” thus expressed in cycle and analytical language.

Somehow, the language of sin has morphed into either conservative religious expression or psycho-babble. We use therapeutic terms—we’re sick rather than sinful. Or it’s an educational problem—we’re racist because we don’t have proper understanding. Or an expression of our anxiety about being human—we’re frail and vulnerable creatures. There is some truth to all of those things, but it fails to reach to the heart of the matter theologically.

Truth be told, I don’t think the church has done a whole lot to help. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall contends that the church makes a fatal mistake when it switches its focus from sin which is a matter pertaining to the human condition, to sins, those discreet trans-

gressions, that can be catalogued and controlled. “The individualism fostered by pietistic and liberal expressions of Protestantism has greatly aggravated the tendency to identify sin with negative qualities and negative personal failings.”

Ched Meyers notes that “Dominant-culture Christianity in the United States has domesticated the language of sin. Conservatives tend to focus on personal morality. Liberals captivated by the secular myth of progress are, tend to be embarrassed by the language of sin.”

Sin, with all of its baggage and discomfort, is set aside like so many other quaint notions of religious insights that are now eclipsed by the development of human thought. But it’s not so easily left there.

There’s value, albeit not a particularly comfortable one in reclaiming the language of sin. As Niebuhr suggests, that may be easier than we imagine. It begins when we simply pay attention.

That’s what happens to Isaiah and to Simon. In the first scripture, young Isaiah is in a temple at worship and he has this stunning vision. He sees a whole host of cherubims singing, “Holy, holy, holy”. His response wasn’t “Wow, look at that!” The first words out of his mouth were “Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips.” Think about it.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus commandeers a fishing boat to get some distance from the gathering crowd. The fisherfolk are frustrated after fishing all night and catching nothing. They skeptically lower their nets at Jesus’ invitation. When they pulled their nets in over the boat, Peter doesn’t say, “Hey, this is really something!” No, he says, “Depart from me for I am a sinful man.” It is a stunning theological insight, perhaps second only to Peter’s confession that Jesus was indeed the Christ. Most of the time, we lose those words because we are so busy rushing over them to get to his call to discipleship.

Both Isaiah and Peter show us that an awareness of sin comes as a result of simply being confronted by God. There’s something about seeing God for who God is. It helps us to see us for who we are. It’s just that simple. It’s a theological issue, not an anthropological one. To speak of sin is to speak of God first. It means that we come face to face with the awesome righteousness and holiness of God. The other insights follow along pretty naturally. Faced with the truth of who God is and what God asks of us invites us to go to a place that we don’t often or willingly go.

Christine Smith notes, “It’s essential to feel sin and evil in the world and our own complicity in it. It brings weeping and lament. Yet, this is only the first step. It is then crucial for us to have the humility and bravery to speak our own wrongdoing aloud and to speak about it with absolute, vulnerable honesty.”

That’s what we see in Isaiah and in Peter. The last piece is redemptive action. Awareness of sin requires life-changing repentance, that full movement of weeping acknowledgement, truthful confession and then restorative action.

It’s interesting that these realizations of Isaiah and Peter come in the context of their call

to discipleship. There's a sense in which their call to discipleship becomes all the more honest and all the more real for the insight that they have not only into who God is but into all that they are or fail to be.

It's all of a piece which is a whole lot easier for us to speak of the things that come later—faithfulness, giving, discipleship. What we tend to forget is that all of them have a root in the moments of insight that allow us to measure just how far we are from the nearest outpost of the kingdom.

Awareness of sin isn't intended to be a laundry list of behaviors nor is it intended to create paralyzing guilt and shame but rather an acknowledgment of how far we are from the righteousness and glory of God. That is the foundation of discipleship.

An authentic understanding of sin is contingent on having a vision of God. It's not all about us. It's all about God. Seeing God for who God is helps us to see us for who we are. The journey of discipleship begins not once and for all but each and every day from that place of insight—weeping, confession, repentance, discipleship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Christ ... cheap grace. And grace is free but it's never cheap.

Amen.

