

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 2, 2024

Before we read scripture together and hear it proclaimed, let us join our hearts and our minds in prayer. Let's pray together. Gracious and loving Spirit, as you moved across that early gathering of People of the Way bringing forth new languages that were understood perfectly, bring forth life amongst us this very morning. Fall fresh and bring your peace. Fall fresh and bring your interruption. Fall fresh and unsettle us and make us new. We ask it in the name of the crucified and risen one, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

So we continue this morning in our summer long sermon series. We've entitled it Theology 101, Back to the Basics of Faith. The idea is that we are going to tackle some things that...some theological terms that you might be familiar with. You may have heard them spoken of in maybe a Sunday school class or even from a pulpit. We're going to try to make sure that we have a deep understanding of those, and others you may not have heard of. And they, the terms, might actually give language to something that you believe or have subscribed to but don't actually know the theological term for. So we'll get to those later on in the summer. Last week Mary joked that she had drawn the short straw with Trinity, and if Trinity is the short straw, I'm not sure what sin is. It might just be that we have a ton of short straws this summer. Steve Haynes is going to be preaching for us later on this summer. When I reached out and I said would you preach on Justification, he said, "Can I preach on anything else besides Justification? We're going to learn together some new things and some difficult things and also, hopefully, have some really important doctrine reframed for us.

Friends, this morning our lesson comes to us from Paul's letter to the church in Rome, Romans 7:14 through the first part of verse 25. So let us listen together for God's word to each of us and to the Church.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

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It's going to be important for us to keep in mind throughout our entire series this summer that all doctrine, all Church doctrine begins with personal experience. In his work *Wishful Thinking*, Presbyterian minister and contemporary theologian Frederick Buechner wrote, "No matter how fancy and metaphysical a doctrine sounds, it was a human experience first." He uses as an example the doctrine of the Divinity of Christ. "The place," he says, "it began was not in the word processor of some fourth century Greek theologian, but in the experience of basically un-theological people who had known Jesus of Nazareth and found something happening to their lives that had never happened before. Unless you can somehow participate yourself in the experience that lies behind a doctrine, simply to subscribe to it doesn't mean much. Sometimes, however, simply to subscribe to a doctrine is the first step towards experiencing the reality that lies behind it." For Buechner the study of theology and doctrine, specifically, was to be a deeply personal one, but also a connection to the way in which the personal becomes the corporate, the communal. So we must find ourselves, we must somehow participate ourselves in the experience that lies behind the doctrine of sin if we are to truly understand it to the extent that it is possible. Which is right then for us to study from Romans this morning, because what we get is Paul's personal experience of how sin is at work within him and in his life. Paul says in verse 15, "I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And then later in verse 19, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." This is Paul's experience—waking up in the morning, setting an intention for the day, and by sundown it not having come to fruition; and then again waking up in the morning and saying an intention for the day, and again he lays his head on a pillow at night and finds he has not done it. In fact he has done the opposite of what he desired to do. In this he helps us understand a little more deeply what sin is.

Defining many of these theological terms will pretty much take the entirety of our sermons, but we also do need some parameters for us, because we tend to think of sin, as we define it, as a poor action taken on our part or even a series of poor actions. If that is the case, if that's what sin is, then Jesus simply becomes for us a self help guru, who helps us do those poor actions less. But if sin is something more than that, if it's something more, with more depth and more significance, then Jesus's role in our lives and in the world becomes more prominent. I want to posit to you this morning, as some theologians have done, that sin, if we are to define it, is a distortion of our relationship with God. If you are a notetaker, write that down.

Sin is a distortion of our relationship with God.

It is, as one of my favorite professors used to like to say, "It is all that simple and all that hard." But, preacher, do you mean any distortion of relationship with God? Yep, from the simplest to the most complex, sin then changes, distorts, reshapes our relationship with the Triune God. Unless we think it ends there, Jesus, we remember, clearly said, "What you do unto the least of these, you have done unto me. When you mistreat the least of these, you have mistreated me." And so, then sin also extends to any distortion of our relationship with our neighbor, because, of course, our relationship with our neighbor is our relationship with our God. Sin is any distortion of relationship then with God and with neighbor. It is not a single action but a set of actions. Paul describes it as seemingly a condition that permeates his entire being. He knows what is right. It is close at hand, and yet he cannot will it to happen. Paul says, "Now if I do what I do not want, it

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is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” You might first read this as Paul abdicating responsibility for that which he does, but I would posit to you that he is simply saying that we are predisposed to this distorting of our relationship with God and neighbor.

As we study sin we have to understand its dimensions. Perhaps you're familiar, if you've heard a sermon on sin before, with the terms omission and commission. Has anybody heard those terms? Yeah, the idea that sin is two-dimensional in nature. It is those things that we participate in whether we are aware of our participation or not, and it is also that which we do not do. It is the...it is the person who doesn't just not care for the person on...for the man who has been left for dead on the road to Jericho, right, simply passes by because there's other things that need to be done.

I would say though that there are not just those dimensions of omission and commission when it comes to sin, but Paul is actually describing two other dimensions of sin—and that is personal and communal. I'm not going to go too in depth into personal sin, because what I imagine is when we...when you opened up the bulletin this morning, you looked on the front page and you saw in chalk written **sin**. You may have, and if you didn't you were probably avoiding it, you may have begun to connect something that you feel is a distortion of your relationship with God that you are experiencing in your life right now, something that you are actively engaged in or omitting. We won't delve too deep into the particularities of that personal sin, but Paul says that it is active in his life. And when he talks about doing that which he doesn't desire to do, he means that personally, but he also means that as he describes it as part of the “members of the body.” This...in this communal way Paul understands that sin is an existential threat, because it is a part of all of the systems that he navigates. It's a part of his religious system. That's why he talks about the law so much. What he's saying is ‘sin can even creep into my religious life. The law isn't bad on its face, but the way I've been living into it is shaping me in a way that is distorting my relationship with the Divine.’ Paul was often one who critiques social and economic systems as well. He understands that those systems, those social and economic systems, can also distort, writ large, our relationship with God.

Maybe when you came in and you saw that sin was our topic this morning, it took you back to the church of your childhood. If you didn't grow up Presbyterian, then perhaps you had repeated to you each and every Sunday a sermon on sin. Many of you are recovering ‘other denominations,’ I'll just say. I don't need to call anybody out. And you are here because you have found in this place, a place where that's not the message every single week. Some denominations, some ways of following in the path of Jesus Christ, may have hyper focused on the personal dimension of sin that leads to boatloads of shame, right? It also leads to, I would say, a reduction in what the good news of Jesus Christ means; but it also...it also doesn't pay enough attention to communal sin, to sin that has taken root within systems, okay. But then there are other denominations, maybe like ours, who have focused so hyper on communal sin that we have divorced ourselves from the deeply personal ways that we...that we distort our relationship with God and neighbor. It is out there, the systems are, and therefore not in here; and yet what Paul says is that it is both at the same time. If the Church is to truly wrap our collective minds

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and hearts around sin and the doctrine of it, we have to understand it is equal parts personal and communal at the same time. Those in the Reformed tradition are called to recognize both. And so, therefore, your relationship with your God is distorted when you lie and when you envy and when you are gluttonous and when you are angry and when you are malicious and when you...when you are unfaithful in all the ways that you are, but also our relationship collectively with our God is distorted when we participate in, whether knowingly or unknowingly, in systems that are sick with sin. Some of us have an issue when the mirror is held up to us personally. Some of us have issues when the mirror is held up to us communally. Some of us can stare in that mirror and know 'I am broken and in need of God's grace, but don't tell me my church is or that my community is.' Others don't want to look at the personal but are all too ready to see the brokenness in the greater world. For Paul there were systems of economic and social injustice, and those still exist today. Systems built in ways that distort our neighbors' relationship with the Divine and ours too. Those get exposed over time, of course, and then the church has the chance to reckon with the ways in which they are exposed or neglected.

In the midst of our Elder offboarding, one of our Elders spoke about a sermon preached from this pulpit by Reverend Dr. Steve Montgomery the day or the morning after the Pulse Nightclub shooting—the sin of homophobia revealed in violence against neighbor. Many years before that from this pulpit, speaking in the wake of the actions and the violence that took place at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, the sin of racism shown as violence against neighbor revealed itself. But we don't have to go back years to see the way sin permeates the systems of our world either. We look to the horrors of Rafa this week, the way in which violence begets violence begets violence begets violence, the sin of unmitigated violence against neighbor.

I think it's appropriate that Steve taught our adult forum this morning. It was entitled "Why can't the Church be more like AA?" I think it's appropriate that that was what we learned together during the adult formation hour, because Shanita Monroe observes this part of the text. She observes that this part of the text in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, it actually sounds like an AA meeting. "Hi, my name is Paul and I am a sinner." Whatever you think about Paul, he follows the first step. The key, of course, to breaking the power of sin in our lives and in the world is that we have to reckon with it, we have to acknowledge its existence. We cannot, it turns out, confront that which we are afraid to admit even exists, and so that is true in your life and in my life and in our corporate life together. There's an often repeated story about G. K. Chesterton. The story goes that the Times of London once sent an inquiry to famous authors asking them the question, "What is wrong with the world today?" When G. K. Chesterton received this inquiry, he had an interesting yet unsurprising response. He did not blame the world's dysfunction on some external problem, not on a president or even a political party or anything else, and on top of that he did not take the opportunity to put those views of his into the Times. He knew that the dysfunction of the world runs far deeper than his personal politics. What is wrong with the world, he knew, is sin. And so Chesterton, responding to the Times of London said, "I am. What is the problem, what is wrong with the world today. I am," Chesterton said, "I am in the ways that I distort my relationship with

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God. I am in the ways that I participate in systems that distort my relationship and my neighbor's relationship with God.”

Paul is calling the Church to take seriously the power of sin in the world, but he doesn't leave it there. He gives a remedy. In fact, he just simply reveals that the remedy is already present. It's short. You might not have even caught it, but in the first part of verse 25, Paul says “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord.” There is so much wrapped up in half of a verse for him. He has this long prelude of all the ways in which sin is at work in his life, but “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord.” What Paul knew and what he had experienced was that the person of Christ and the way in which God was at work through Christ had the ability to change absolutely everything. “Wretched person that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? Christ will. Wretched person that I am, waking up every morning setting an intention and not fulfilling it, who will help change that way of living? Christ will. Wretched person that I am, participating in systems that impact people and I scarcely know how I do it, who will save me? Christ will.” People in the Reformed tradition, we claim that sin has particular power in our lives and in the world, and that that power is broken by Christ. Christ saves us from our sin. Christ breaks the power of sin in our lives and in the world. We, personally and communally, can be made free by Christ. You can be free of the sin. I can be free of the sin that binds us, free of that which distorts your relationship, my relationship, with our God. And so can the entire world. It's a crazy statement when you think about it, that “in Christ Jesus all can be made free.” That means that wherever your mind went when you looked at the title of today's sermon, however enmeshed and entangled you feel yourself in that, Christ can disentangle you from it. Christ can disentangle you from that which distorts your relationship with your God. Not only that, but the systems that we participate in, the Reformed theologians would call Powers and Principalities, those can be broken. Those can be, we can be, disentangled from by Jesus Christ.

Yesterday about 40 or 50 people, I would say, donned all sorts of outfits and marched—I guess West—on Beale Street. I was the least festively dressed of the entire crew. I don't know why. I had long black pants and a long sleeve blue shirt, and it was 90° outside, but I felt it important to have a collar on. We marched as a sign of confession and repentance and solidarity of the Church of Jesus Christ with those who have been pushed historically to the margins of our society, for LGBTQIA folk, those who have been forgotten or even, yay, excluded from the Church. It's pretty easy to show up, actually, easier even to walk when we did it together. What I know is that there were people on either side of Beale Street who had been taught by the Church of their childhood that they had a distorted relationship with their God because of who they were. It turns out that that was actually the sin of the Church, distorting their relationship that wasn't distorted at all, but it's easy to do in hindsight. It's easy to do years and years after the hard work of inclusion and affirmation have been completed. It is harder for the church to reckon with that sin which it is afraid to even name.

Over the next several months you're going to hear about the work that the Session has been doing, specifically related to our role and participation in racism and white supremacy. Those are difficult words for some ears, difficult things even more for the Church to disentangle itself

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from. Words you might be uncomfortable with. And yet the Church has begun to reckon with what our past means for who we are now and who we will be. You'll hear more and more about how it is we are following the processes of our Reformed faith, where we confess together corporately, where we claim together the grace of God, and where we move from this place forgiven and made new to help make our community brand new as well.

Paul puts all this stuff together in like nine verses, 11 verses if you will, excuse me, but what I want to tell you is that his reckoning with sin is a much longer game for him. It is...it is born out of tears and division and hurt, but where it has gotten him is complete and utter reliance on the grace of God to forgive him and make him brand new. Church, it is our calling as followers of the way of Christ to do the exact same—to wrestle and to argue and to reflect and to pray and then to fall in to the grace and the forgiveness and the renewal that can only be offered by Jesus Christ. Christ freed Paul. Christ frees you. Christ frees us. May we be unafraid to reckon with the sin in our personal and corporate lives. May we trust always that in Jesus Christ, thanks be to God, all can be made new.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.