

Exodus 32:1,7-14
Psalm 51:1-11
1 Timothy 1:12-17
LUKE 15:1-10

Sermon – September 16, 2007

SIN is front and center in all of today's scriptures: an inescapable, central reality of human life – and, indeed, the central problem of human life, Christianity says.

Sin is defined by the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer (page 848) as “the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation.” Sins, plural, are simply individual examples of what happens when six billion people each think that they are the center of the universe and that everything is supposed to revolve around them: there will be lots and lots of “orbital collisions,” lots and lots of bumps and bruises and worse.

War, famine, crime, violence, racism, oppression, greed, lust, degradation, abuse, environmental pollution and exploitation, genocide, extermination of species – we could go on and on. All are sins or the result of sins or both, and all sins are the manifestation of the basic human sin: as the Catechism puts it (p.848): “We [human beings] rebel against God, and we put ourselves in the place of God.”

All human beings do this to some extent – some, obviously, more than others, or more conspicuously. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, all fallen short of God's design for us. We are all made in the image of God; as the Catechism says again, which “means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God,” but “from the beginning, human beings have misused their freedom and made wrong choices.”

Christianity declares that the ultimate power in the universe is both its Creator and its final Judge: Almighty God. God is so loving that God gave us human beings freedom, even knowing that we would use that freedom to “blow off” the one who gave it to us.

God was tempted to give us human beings what we deserved: our Old Testament story this morning tells of God's anger when the people of Israel started worshipping statues of pagan idols just days after receiving the Ten Commandments and within weeks of being delivered from slavery in Egypt into freedom en route to the Holy Land.

“The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.” Instead, he forgave them. Not once, but again and again, and kept offering them renewed guidance, inspired leaders and steadfast love – along with chastisements – such that the people of God were sustained and nurtured and endured while mighty empires around them and over them crashed and burned and disappeared from history.

Only by God's **forgiveness** was a second chance possible for God's people. Forgiveness does not mean that someone didn't do wrong: only wrong deeds *need* forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't mean a deed "doesn't matter": trivial actions don't need forgiveness. Forgiveness also does not necessarily mean that there will be no consequences from the wrong deed. Often, wrong deeds have consequences that are inevitable or necessary. Forgiveness means that the person doing the forgiving elects **not** to exact the revenge they may feel entitled to for the hurt they have suffered because of a wrong.

The person who did wrong may still pay a price: when someone tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II, the assailant had to face appropriate consequences for his crime – but the Pope also forgave him. He did not seek revenge. That liberates the person doing the forgiving, as well as the person receiving the forgiveness.

Any human forgiveness of others is made possible by and modeled after God's offer of forgiveness to us. If a person really, really comes face to face with how far short of God's design for his or her life he or she has fallen, that person will realize how much he or she needs to receive God's forgiveness. Some of the greatest saints – Peter and Paul, to name two – have been most acutely aware of their need for forgiveness. This reminds us that none of us are above needing God's forgiveness – and if we think we are, we have so much pride we are in even greater need for God's forgiveness than we imagined. And Peter and Paul's example reminds us also that an awareness of our own sinfulness does not mean our case is hopeless: if we know that our disease is sin, and the cure is God's forgiveness, guidance and new life by God's grace, all we have to do is turn to Jesus Christ, the Great Physician, and ask to be healed and for a fresh start.

That is what happened to someone who many people would have thought was beyond hope. John Newton, an Englishman, was the captain of a ship in the late 1700's which sailed down the west coast of Africa and kidnapped people at gunpoint, or bought them, chained them in the fetid hold of his ship and carried them thousands of miles from home. The ones who survived, he sold to brutal sadists. He was a slave trader, one of the lowest scum of the earth.

Somehow God reached even him. In the midst of a life-threatening storm at sea, this erstwhile heartless man said, "God have mercy on me" – and wondrously, God did. That mercy came with life-changing commandments: he had to stop his vile profession, completely. There are some things it is simply impossible for a person to do and to live in accordance with God's will. But stopping doing bad was not enough; life cannot be lived with one's "transmission" in neutral. John Newton became a Christian, became an Anglican priest, in fact, and most decisively for history, became the expert witness for the lobby against the slave trade. Naturally, there was a pro-slave trade lobby, and it probably belittled its opponents as ignorant, do-gooders out of touch with the "real world."

John Newton said, in essence, “I know exactly what the slave trade involves because I did it, and I will tell Parliament every sordid detail.” Finally, in 1808, Parliament passed a law making the slave trade illegal after years of lobbying. In the process of working out his salvation in fear and trembling John Newton had saved lives and helped to galvanize a nation.

It was his way to say “thank you” to God for God’s forgiveness of him.

Another part of John Newton’s “thank you” to God was a hymn he wrote, which embodies the words of our Epistle this morning. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners,” it says: that means you, and me and everyone else. “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” If we are not saved, we are lost: lost forever, for all eternity, smug in our delusions of self-sufficiency and self-righteousness in a Hell of our own design, cut off from God, from other people and from the best selves we could have been

The author of First Timothy writes, “But I received mercy...and the grace of Our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

It is God’s nature to love us despite everything, and God’s love means offering us forgiveness, and when we repent of our sins and accept God’s forgiveness and ask to be made new the cheering is so loud in heaven I think we can hear it from here. As Jesus says in today’s Gospel, “There is joy in the presence of God over one sinner who repents.”

So it was John Newton, former slave trader, former notorious sinner – who realized he was a notorious sinner before most of his contemporaries did, let’s remember – who wrote a hymn which strikes to the heart of God’s forgiveness. Grace is the love God has for us when we need it most and deserve it least.

It is indeed “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found, was blind, but now I see.”

“Twas grace that taught my soul to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.”

The central human problem is sin, which has manifestations and consequences both personal and social. We cannot heal our brokenness and the world’s by our own efforts alone; only by God’s forgiveness can we begin to be restored to right relationship with God, with each other, with the whole creation, and with our own best selves.

If we seek and accept God’s forgiveness, we can begin to be healed. Our healing continues and the world’s healing begins when we not only accept forgiveness from God but extend it to others instead of holding grudges and seeking revenge. Healing multiplies when we, like John Newton, find ways to say “thank you” to God and participate in the transformation of the world in accordance with God’s love.

Inside the word “forgive” is the word **give**. God has **given** so much to us, including forgiveness. We cannot give back to God enough to “balance our account” for the extraordinary gift of Jesus Christ dying for us, taking all the brokenness of the world on his shoulders while saying from the cross, “Father, forgive them.”

In conclusion, our questions for ourselves today are these:

- Do we acknowledge that we need God’s forgiveness because we are sinners, do we ask for God’s forgiveness and receive it into our hearts?
- Do we then start to do as Jesus bids us do in the Lord’s Prayer: *forgive others*, remembering that the measure we *give* is the measure we get back? Remember, if it’s hard to forgive someone, start by forgiving something small and working up, but *start!* Forgiveness is a choice: if we prefer to hold grudges, eventually the grudges will hold us – forever.
- Do we then also, like John Newton, find a way to say “thank you” to God for God’s amazing grace? It doesn’t have to be some great historic act. Indeed, Mother Teresa said “We can do no great things, only small things with great love.” All of us can find ways to do those – and what a different world this will be then!

The Rev. Francis A. Hubbard

St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, New Jersey