



Ash Wednesday

Regarding Sin

[RCL] Joel 2:1-2,12-17 or Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 103 or 103:8-14; 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10;
Matthew 6:1-6,16-21

Sin.

Mention of sin usually puts us on the defensive. Even worse, the discussion of sin puts us on the dismissive. The dismissive is when we have made up our minds to refuse to even listen. Well, here we are at Ash Wednesday and there is a great deal said about sin.

What is sin? Sin is variously described in our tradition as stain, separation, offense, a missing of a mark – that is, being off-target. There is truth in all of these descriptions, and if one of them speaks to you, then go with that. But for most of us, the language of sin has been obscured and even lost; sin, as a concept doesn't make a great deal of sense.

What's to be done about this? For some, it seems convenient to simply leave sin in the rearview mirror, to move on without it. In fact, the history of the past several hundred years is one where sin has been left behind. And yet we keep coming back to sin because, well, look around. It turns out that the issues of political divide, deeply seated prejudices, not to mention all the inhumanity of our common life that the pandemic has revealed cannot be explained away by ignorance or a lack of political will. We need something stronger. We need sin. Differences of policy or interpretation cannot bear the weight of what life is like. We need something bigger, stronger. We need sin.

But it's simply not helpful to say that we have racist systems because we are sinful. That would be like telling someone who is terminally ill that they need more faith. It's just not helpful. We need new language to understand an ancient truth.

Two helpful terms that help in understanding sin are isolation and damage. Isolation has been described by Samuel Wells as the chief human problem in our age. Certainly, the pandemic has highlighted this problem. Isolation impedes our life, our abundant life, because we are created to be in communion with God, our neighbors, and ourselves. When we are isolated or isolate ourselves, our humanity is diminished. The quickest way to drive someone insane is to put them in solitary confinement. We were created in the triune image of God, which is a loving community of persons that are so caught up in giving that they share a

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nature. This is why reconciliation is such a theme of God's work – and therefore ours – because sin is isolation.

The other term that is helpful for understanding sin is damage. Damage is inflicted upon us and it is also self-inflicted. The notion of damage also carries with it a notion of wholeness and health prior to the damage. We are created good, but something happens, something damages us, yet we can be restored to health; damage is not our nature nor our fate.

As we look at our readings today, we can substitute damage and isolation for sin. From the Corinthians reading: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This could be read as: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be damaged who knew no damage, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Here we see that Jesus, who was not damaged, took upon himself our damage to heal us.

Sin as isolation sounds like this: “We entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be isolated who knew no isolation, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” By Jesus taking on our isolation, we are reconciled, that is, reunited, to God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

This linguistic switcheroo is helpful in the liturgy as well. A little later in this Ash Wednesday liturgy, there will be an invitation to the observance of a holy Lent. It describes Lent as, “a time when those who, because of notorious sins, had been separated from the body of the faithful were reconciled by penitence and forgiveness, and restored to the fellowship of the Church.” When those who, because of notorious damage or isolation, inflicted and self-inflicted, were reconciled and healed and restored to the *fellowship* of the church.

This action of substituting those words “damage” and “isolation” for sin allows us to, perhaps for the first time, hear what sin is and how it hurts us. Sin isolates us from God, ourselves, and our neighbors. It sets up walls that are not supposed to be there that keep us from thriving. Sin damages our goodness, our soundness. Sin hurts our healthy integrity. And we need healing; we need reconciliation.

Ash Wednesday is our reminder of our isolation and damage. How we have separated ourselves and hurt ourselves and have been both victim and perpetrator of isolation and damage. It's a reminder that you are human, you will die, that you are a sinner, and that, yes, there is reconciliation of isolation through Christ, there is healing of damage through Christ.

It is so important for us to recover a healthy sense of sin both theologically and socially. The first part of this Ash Wednesday message is about the theological importance of sin, but the social impacts are just as important.

There is something called the Dunning-Kruger Effect, a theory developed by a pair of social psychologists. The theory basically states that the level of someone's competency in an area is inversely proportional to their level of confidence in that area. In other words, people with low ability generally overestimate their ability. What's this have to do with sin? A great deal. Understanding oneself as a sinner brings a modicum of humility into one's life that has the practical effect of knowing that you might be wrong and that you are not the judge of all that is. It is the one who believes that he is without sin that is the most dangerous. This bears repeating: the one who is convinced of their sinlessness is the most dangerous to themselves and to others.

We are sinners. So be it. And we have healing of that sin through Christ. That healing is for our flourishing, for us to enter into the abundant life of God. Our saving, our salvation, is not primarily to quit the life of the flesh to go to heaven. And our salvation is not primarily the celestial fire insurance of rescuing us from the flames of hell. Instead, our salvation is accepting God's healing of our damage and the reconciliation of our isolation. God is not our elevator, hopefully only taking us up, no, God is our abundant life lived in health and community.

As we move into and through Lent, carry these helpful images of sin as damage and isolation. Take up your Lenten disciplines that can begin to address your damage and isolation. And remember that God is *for* you, so desperately. Amen.

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