

"The Most Respectable Sin"
Psalm 34:1-10; Philippians 3:4b-14
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Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.
Philippians 4:7

In 1973, the renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* Beneath the title lay the assumption that something had happened to sin, a concept that had been understood in Western religion for the last 2,000 years, but had disappeared from the modern mind, leaving our culture without an adequate vocabulary when speaking about the brokenness of the human condition. What we have instead is psychological language. What we have instead are sociological explanations. Few people speak of sin anymore.

There are still a few scattered pockets of sin-talk out there. You can still turn on the television and find a fire-breathing preacher bouncing a Bible up and down in his hand and telling certain categories of people off for being dirty rotten sinners, but, for the most part, main-line Christianity has ceded the concept of sin to the fundamentalists. Today, I want to suggest that has been a mistake. I want to think with you about sin in general and then about one particular sin. I might be the only preacher in Atlanta this morning, in a main-line church, even during this penitential season of Lent, speaking on the subject of sin.

Someone recently thanked me for my regular preaching about the grace of God and the acceptance of God. "We really need that," he said. We do need to hear the good news of the Gospel. For many who have been wounded by a religious atmosphere of judgment and wrath, for many who have been taught that it is impossible to ever please God, for all of those people, the news that God is for us and not against us is good news indeed. In his book, *The God I Never Knew*, Marcus Borg describes the minister of the church in which he grew up. His name was Pastor Thorson. He was a finger-shaker preacher. He shook his finger even when he was saying that people were forgiven of their sins. The message conveyed was that while we were being forgiven, it was a really close call.

No one except the masochistic-minded wants to be scolded. Yet, I wonder if our weekly tipping of the hat to our intractable, sinful condition by means of that routine prayer of confession is really enough to get at what truly ails us as individuals and as a society. It is a shame that we have lost that profoundly important aspect of the Christian faith that knows that we are utterly dependent upon God's justifying righteousness as revealed unsparingly in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

In the 1980s I served on the committee that wrote the Brief Statement of Faith, the confession that we often use at worship at Morningside Church. This Confession of Faith went through a number of drafts and throughout the process of writing, which took seven or eight years, we sent a number of our drafts out around the country for Presbyterian congregations to respond to. We were completely unprepared for the negative reaction we received to one particular line in the Brief Statement of Faith. A ballistic response is the only way I can describe it. Thousands of Presbyterians hated this line: "We deserve God's condemnation." We had to laugh at two suggestions that were made by the irate responders. One was that we should change the line to read "Some people deserve God's condemnation." And then my favorite: "We deserved to be evaluated by God."

Remember, these were Presbyterians who were having a heart attack at the very idea that we are sinners in need of God's grace. But we are, and were this not the case, the redemptive activity of God, to which we shall turn in humble gratitude during Holy Week, becomes a really nice but unnecessary gesture. "He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities." All right, that was very nice of him to do it, but he didn't really need to do it.

I think of our Puritan forbearers and how nothing could be more out of style in 2007 than that Puritan doctrine of Calvinism, named after John Calvin, the father of the Reformed stream of Protestantism, to which we Presbyterians are heir. (I was distressed to learn that the editors of *New York Magazine* now use the word "Calvinism" to describe the fashion trend initiated by the clothing designer Calvin Klein.) The Calvinists might have been somewhat mean-spirited, but they were right about this: that in order for us to keep our bearings as human beings, we must keep our eye not on our own goodness, but on the goodness of God. There has to be some other referent besides ourselves.

Genuine human happiness comes in remembering that our lives are lived before God. I cannot live the life I am intended to live if I do not let go of my own

carefully crafted self-deceptions and face the truth about where I am and how I fall short. There is not a human being who has ever lived who does not need to face the truth, that God is the one who saves.

Andrew Delbanco is a Humanities professor at Columbia University. Several years ago he wrote a book about Alcoholics Anonymous, and to do his research, he went all around the country attending AA meetings. He writes, "I met some desperate and remarkably eloquent people who found themselves in the grips of an addiction, what the Puritans would have called a sin, from which they had sworn a thousand times they were going to be able to free themselves, but couldn't. One Saturday morning, in a New York City church basement, I listened to a crisply dressed young man, whose every word and gesture indicated a grievously wounded pride. He went on and on about how badly he had been treated by so many people for so many years. While he was speaking, the man sitting next to me, an African-American man with dreadlocks and sunglasses, leaned over and whispered, 'I used to feel that way myself, until I developed low self-esteem.'"

Delbanco heard the man's comment as an echo of the great old Calvinist understanding: "Pride is the enemy of hope." God cannot help us if we will not let go of our pride.

Pride is the sin about which I want to speak specifically. It is the first of the seven deadly or capital sins on the list composed by a man named Evagrius of Pontus in the year 399. The list does not consist of sinful behaviors, but rather states of mind that Evagrius believed interfered the most with our communion with God and with other people. They were called deadly sins or capital sins, capital not because they were the most terrible, but because they had such generative power. In other words, they had the capacity to produce so many other sins. Pride always came at the top of the list, which consisted of envy, covetousness, gluttony, sloth, lust and anger.

Augustine defined pride as that which results from the soul's cutting itself off from its source – that is – God, and becoming an end in itself. Unlike the Psalmist, whose soul 'boasts in the Lord,' the prideful person exults in the self and over time loses the capacity to focus on God and on his or her rightful place in the world that God has created. You begin to think, to put it in the language of common parlance, of yourself more highly than you ought to think. You move from self esteem, from an authentic and appropriate sense of self-worth, into a

state of self-absorption, and you lose the capacity to be able to admit fault or wrong. It's always someone else's fault.

It is so interesting to me to follow the debate in the Georgia Legislature over whether or not Georgia should apologize for the role it played in slavery. Read the arguments, see if you detect just a little bit of pride that cannot ever say, "We're sorry". Even if we didn't personally do it, we have a corporate sense of responsibility; yet, it is so hard to say you're sorry.

Pride in its perverted form intensifies in to arrogance, and arrogance can lead to just about any kind of wrong. On a national scale, the attitude of empire emerges. On a personal scale, we begin to measure our worth and our value on the basis of our credentials and accomplishments. We come to understand ourselves, not as humble creatures to whom God has given gifts to use for the sake of others and for the well-being of the world, but as better than anybody else. Paul the Apostle had once felt himself to be far superior to others. He relied on his credentials. He had been born into the house of Israel, unlike some of the Gentiles to whom he was writing who had been converted. He was one of the original "First Families of Virginia". He was in the in-crowd. He was a righteous man blameless under the law. "I did everything I was supposed to," he said. "My record was spotless, and yet I've come to the point where all of that has become rubbish to me. I have let go of esteeming myself too highly, and I have replaced excessive self-esteem with Christ-esteem."

It is a good thing to care for oneself, to have self-respect. I was at a meeting last week hearing about child prostitution in Atlanta, GA. Did you know that Atlanta, GA is one of the ten leading cities in the world for trafficking in children? There are lots of adults who are responsible for that. There are lots of adults who have used and abused and continue to use and abuse children, but I'll tell you what's going on with the children and young teenagers who are involved in this. They have no self-esteem. They feel utterly unworthy, and unworthiness results in hopelessness. When that happens, then any terrible thing can be done to you.

I am for self-respect. I don't go with that old hymn that says *Oh what a worm I am*. God has given the human creature a special place in creation, and we have the responsibility to claim our joy and not let anyone take away our self-respect. What God means for us to do is to let go of our reliance on everything that we have accumulated and accomplished as giving meaning to our existence, so that something better, something more lasting, something more life-giving can take its place. Paul puts it in strong theological terms: "I want to be able to share in

Christ's suffering and death and thereby gain life and the power of Christ's resurrection." In other words, I have let go of living a first-person-singular kind of life and have begun to live a God-centered life, a life like that which Christ lived.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave Jesus a wonderful name. He called him "a man for others". Paul wanted to share in that way of being, the way of the Son of God, who though he was equal to God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself taking the form of a servant and being obedient to the point of death on the cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)

Can you imagine giving up all the sense of self-absorption and becoming a person for others? It's hard to know where even to begin. I am going to let the Deacons who are being installed today be my role models. Deacons are called by God to love, to care, to give, to serve, to sacrifice as Christ did. (Fred Craddock, *Throwing Away the Good Stuff*) The word *diakonos* really means "servant at the table," like the waiter at the table. Jesus said to his disciples, when they were trying to figure out who's the greatest; who's going to get the most pats on the back; who's going to sit at the right hand of God? "You might think the one who sits at the table is the greatest, but I am among you as the one who serves."

Neither the Deacons nor any of the rest of us will ever be able actually to become like Christ. But like Paul, we can press on to make new life in him our own. Because Christ has made us his own, "we press on to the prize of the heavenly calling of God in Christ Jesus." Like the marathon runners for ING this morning, we press on. Our hearts racing, our muscles aching, our feet pounding, forgetting about the self, leaving behind our need to get noticed or to get credit, we press on because something so much better is ahead of us: the life that really is life, that Christ came to give, the life that comes from above, the life that never ends. (Craddock)

I close with a basketball story. In his book *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, Bill Placher writes, "In basketball, in a team sport, the players who are always asking 'How am I doing? Am I getting my share of the shot? Am I going to be the star in tomorrow's newspaper?' Those are the players who never play to their potential. We've all seen games, however, in which the players lose themselves in an effort that involves self-forgetfulness and as they forget themselves, paradoxically, they become the best players. Afterwards, perhaps they look back and say 'Hmmm, we did pretty well', but at the time they were not sitting on their own shoulders thinking how am I doing? They tossed aside the part of themselves that even

cares. And in that forgetfulness of self, they become most fully who they are and whom God created them to be."

Pride is the trickiest of sins. Our Savior took even our pride with him to the cross and smashed its power once and for all. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory. Amen.