

What is Sin? That question confronts modern Christians at every turn. Cornelius Plantinga, in a work entitled: Not the Way it's Supposed to Be, A Breviary of Sin proposes the question: "suppose you are the dinner guest of a beaming but somewhat shaky hostess. As the evening progresses, you discover that her tastes and achievements in cookery lie at a discouragingly low level. At some point, she asks you in front of six other guests how you like her Velveeta, Spam and Lima Bean casserole. The table falls silent, faces turn to you and your hostess waits expectantly. On the spot, you have to make a decision, so you do. You do not tell the brutal truth, nor do you evade (I didn't know a casserole like this was even possible!). You lie. Indeed, you lie winningly."<sup>1</sup> Is that sin? You have stretched and pulled, nipped and tucked the truth into compliance with where you need it to be, but is it sin?

Or suppose you were faced with a more profound ethical dilemma, something of more significant proportions- what then? What are the ethical demands of Christian faith upon you? Say you become aware of accounting irregularities that will deprive shareholders of necessary information, or in all too real and abundant cases, leave persons of limited resources scrambling to find ways to make ends meet. If you blow the whistle, your time is up- you may lose your job, so may others- you have a family to support. You say nothing. Is that sin?

Or perhaps you find yourself in a nation that is waging war, ostensibly on behalf of oppressed populations. To do nothing will leave millions under the tyranny of a brutal

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<sup>1</sup> Plantinga, Cornelius. Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1995) p14

dictator, but to wage war will most surely result in countless refugees, an unacceptable number of children without fathers in largely patriarchal societies with no visible means of support. It's tax season and your taxes pay the bill. Not to pay would result in seizure of assets, possible imprisonment and separation from your family. You write the check. Is that sin?

I find questions of this nature troubling. They are not easy questions, nor should they be, and I am not sure simple answers will give reassurance of a lasting nature. They point to deeper questions like "who am I? Who does God call me to be? How shall I live?"

These questions are enough to throw even the most seasoned Christians into a profound identity crisis.

Our identities are important to us. Books are written about our identity, about how we perceive ourselves. We analyze our identities, we seek to understand who we are in order that we may understand others and get along with them. If you walk into any Barnes and Nobles or Borders you can find a substantial section dedicated to self help and self awareness. You can find endless seminars that will help you empower yourself or understand yourself. It sometimes seems that if we can just understand ourselves then we know how we fit into the world and we can understand others.

We need an identity from which to function. And so even more books are written, and even more seminars are offered explaining to us exactly how our identities are formed in order that we can head things off at the pass and claim the identity that we want. An identity that enables us to live the life that we want to live, to react to people the way we want to react. I wonder if the whole purpose is to function in the world in such a way that captures the ideal of perfection set up and sanctified by a glossy Hollywood photo

shoot. No one wants an identity run amok. No one wants an identity held in bondage. No one wants an identity riddled with sin.

A good friend of mine classifies herself as a conservative evangelical as opposed to mainline protestant. I've never quite warmed to the need to classify oneself religiously as it seems that classifications serve really only to establish the parameters of who's in and who's out. I'm pretty sure those are parameters that Christ died to obliterate. Anyhow that's how she self-identified, and we were having a conversation about sin. "The problem with Presbyterians is you don't want to acknowledge that there is such a thing as sin in the world," she pontificated. Now those were fighting words. I am not much of a fan of being told what my problem is, and I am Presbyterian, so I found myself squared off with the line toed in the sand, and me without a clue what I was going to say to answer this allegation. Now, of course, I have since thought of any number of clever responses and witty repartee that I could lob back at her, but the best I could muster at the time was "no, we just don't dwell on it- it's not our identity."

What then, is our identity? Surely we do not lie awake at night kept up by unresolved existential crises?

Since we are not, surely we must have some understanding of who we are. The question is, what is it, and how did we arrive at it? And how do we make sense, then, of sin? How does sin affect who we are, who we will become and how we will live?

These are the questions that our Gospel lesson this morning asks as well. Surely the question of response to temptation is the question of response to sin. Jesus, still dripping from his baptism, full of the Holy Spirit is led out into the wilderness where he fasted for forty days. Now Forty Days is our first clue that this is a significant event. Forty is a

significant number in the Bible. In the flood, it rained for forty days. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. It means a long time. So Jesus fasted in the wilderness for a long time. Fasting is a spiritual discipline, aimed at focusing the faster on God and Godly things. He went straight from baptism to fasting, to focusing, to incorporating this baptism into his identity and making it a part of who he was. Then he was tempted. The temptation was directed at eating away at his baptismal identity, to undermining who he was and who he was called to be.

It's subtle, temptation, masquerading as good even sometimes. Temptation doesn't knock on the door and say "Hi, my name is temptation and I'm going to lead you down a primrose path toward evil and destruction." No it's much more subtle than that. For temptation to work, there has to be an appeal to it, something more substantial than just a quick payoff and instant gratification. No, with committed people who want to do good and be good, temptation has to blur the lines between good and evil, to present an appealing option that is just deep enough in the shades of grey to fly under the radar and and seem Godly.

So the devil tempted him. Now right away we have to stop and address that question of the Devil. Now committed Christians can disagree vociferously about whether or not the devil is a metaphor for evil or if we need to believe that there is a literal personification of evil, hooves, horns, spiked tail, pitchfork and bad breath. I'm not concerned with that question. It's sufficient to say that sin and evil are real, and for Matthew the devil is how he presents them. Since Matthew said there's a devil in this story, for today at least we're going to go with it. Interpret it your own way... in the end, the result is the same.

The devil tempted him.

He starts right off by chiseling away at his baptismal identity. “If you are the Son of God...” If you are the son of God? If he’s not, then what is he doing? Why is he fasting and praying and enduring temptation if he’s not? If you are...prove it...prove it to me...prove it to yourself...show it. Just a little miracle will do it... Tiny, really. Just make this stone into a loaf of bread. You’re hungry aren’t you? You gotta have food. Just a little act of power. Show me you are the son of God. Prove me wrong...

Jesus answers: “It is written one does not live by bread alone.” That’s an old creed. He quotes scripture. He remembers his identity. He weathers the storm.

It’s not over yet. Then the devil takes him to the temple and he quotes scripture to him. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, for it is written that the angels will protect you. You won’t even stump your toe. Do you really believe you are the Son of God? Put your money where your mouth is. You’ve got a lot mouth for someone with no demonstrated power, spouting off scripture- show me something. If you’ve got the guts, throw yourself down. You gave me scripture, well two can play at that game. Back it up. Throw down.

Jesus answers, “it is said, do not put the Lord your God to the test.” He remembers his identity. He weathers the storm.

In my mind’s eye, this “devil as personification of all evil” is getting seriously perturbed. Twice he has offered good deals and twice he’s had the Bible thrown up in his face. It’s time for him to get really slick. The devil shows him all the kingdoms of the world and says “It’s mine. It’s all mine, it’s under my rule, it’s given to me, and I’ll give it to you, yes I will. The price is small, nothing really. Just worship me. A little word of praise. Worship me and it’s yours. Think of it Jesus, think of all you could do. No more famine,

no more poverty, no more dictators and no more wars... Think of what you are throwing away if you don't- you're turning your back on these poor stupid people who don't know their right from their left- they need you. Just worship me.

Jesus answers, "it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve only him." That's an old creed. He quotes scripture. He remembers his identity. He weathers the storm. Then the devil left. And Matthew said "angels came and waited upon him. But Luke adds, "until an opportune time." Temptation never really goes away.

Temptation is real and it is alluring and we need a baptismal identity to weather the storms. We need to know who we are in order to be the people that God calls us to be. And that is what we are here to do. That is what we do when we gather and sing hymns and listen to sermons and recite creeds Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. We own up to our baptism and we learn and then we say what we believe. And I like to believe that we do it so that when the going really gets tough, when we really are in a moment of crisis we know who we are. We know what matters, and we know what is true. I like to believe that when we say "I believe" we are claiming our own baptismal identity.

But there's a key distinction between Jesus' baptismal identity and ours. That distinction is this: he is our savior, and we need a savior. We need someone to save us precisely because sin and evil are real. Do Presbyterians acknowledge sin? Oh yes. Sin is what cuts us off from God, what alienates us from ourselves and each other. Sin is the violation from of God's *shalom*, or peaceable kingdom of justice and right relationship with God and each other for which God created is. Shalom is all of that... all that God created us to be. Sin is the breaking of that shalom, and it represents all that is evil and all that is not good, not concerned with right relationship with God and each other. We

modern American Christians have a tendency to focus on sins, with an “s” on the end. That’s a result of our evangelical revivalist heritage and it is neither good nor bad, but it obscures the real question. And sins are real, and they are serious, but they are just the symptom. Pride, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth, Envy, Anger, Avarice- the so-called seven deadlies, or any others- they are just symptoms. Sin as a state of being, sin without the “s” on the end is the disease, and it will kill us. Because sin cuts us off from God, not from God’s end, but from ours as we push away from all that God has offered us. It is deadly because there is no life outside of God, the creator of all life. All creation rests in God’s sustaining care. Apart from God, there is no life because all life rests in God. Jesus said that he came in order that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Jesus came and Jesus died in order that sin may never have the last word. Sin and evil do not have the last word. That’s what we are affirming when we stand and say together what we believe. That is the faith that we proclaim when we baptize babies or adults or anyone else or gather at table to share the Lord’s Supper. You see, sacraments are those visible signs of God’s invisible grace. And every act of worship is always about what God has done for us, in coming to us, loving us and dying and rising for us. To speak of grace without acknowledging sin is to cheapen it and devalue it, but to speak ever of sin without grace is to ignore what God has done for us in bringing the kingdom, God’s shalom to our midst, enabling us to live our lives as we were created to live: fully human, fully able to love and be loved. To speak of sin without grace is to ignore the cry of Christ on the cross, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me.” That is our baptismal identity: God’s beloved children, claimed and redeemed at a price.

Many years ago, because I have the ability to carry a tune without the aid of a bucket and I can read music reasonably well, I got to go to Scotland with my seminary's touring choir. I have to say that it is a good gig if you can get it. We sang songs of faith in places that stirred our own faith by simple virtue of where they were, places like St. Giles, the cradle of Presbyterianism, where John Knox preached, but also places like a simple Methodist church on the border between a Catholic neighborhood and a protestant one in Northern Ireland right after "the troubles," a church struggling to heal deep wounds in both neighborhoods. By history and by witness, we were reminded of God's power to heal and transform, even as we sang the songs of faith. Periodically, our driver would stop in places that we wouldn't have known to ask about and tell us why it was important. But one place where he stopped needed no introduction. It was a small country cemetery, really not very different from any other old graveyard except that it was not old, and all the inhabitants died the same day. We were in Lockerbie, and it was the memorial to Pan Am 103. We were mostly silent as we walked around. As we lingered a while in order that our driver might have a rest, our thoughts turned theological, as is often the result of proximity to places of great loss and suffering. One colleague, Linda said, "I think often about my nephew who died very young, so young that he was not baptized. It bothered me so much, I worried so much until Jim Kay, our preaching professor said something that was so simple and yet so profound that I will never forget it. He said, "The only thing that matters is that Jesus died on the cross." That's our identity. We can hold to it, we can claim it or not, we can live up to it or we can deny it. In the end, it's the only thing that matters, Jesus died on the cross. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.