

Some years back I taught a bible study on Matthew in two groups. The plan, which we accomplished, was to read the whole Gospel of Matthew with Tom Long's commentary in one hand for the tough questions. One group was well attended and met in the evenings on Wednesdays at seven. The other group met on Thursdays at noon and was designed to allow the parents of our pre-schoolers to come to Bible study for an hour before time for pickup. That is not remotely what happened. My daytime group turned out to be three women in their mid-eighties. At first they were concerned that it was an inconvenience for me to teach a class for three people, but I assured them that I was going to do the same amount of preparation either way and so they assured me in turn that they would be in my study, like clockwork, every Thursday at noon until – and I promise you this is a direct quote – until one of them began dating a man who could drive after dark. At which point they intended to join my nighttime group.

One thing quickly became clear – in the privacy of my study, it was no holds barred. I still distinctly remember the time that one brought in the worship bulletin from the week before and, pointing to the prayer of confession said to me, “I can't pray this. I didn't *do* any of those things!”

We were discussing *sin* and this prompted another to respond, “Am I *really* a sinner? I know that's what the church teaches, but I keep all of the commandments, I try to be a good person, I come to church, I tithe... what *exactly* makes me a sinner?”

That's a good question.

The church does indeed teach that we are all sinners, but are we all bad people? Indeed, in the Presbyterian Church, if you remember that old Calvinist acrostic TULIP that spells out the key doctrines, the very first is *total depravity*.

Not exactly a ringing endorsement for a grand vision of humanity.

While there are days where I would vouch that the drivers around me are in fact, completely and totally depraved, that's not what it means.

To be a sinner does not mean that you are a bad person. To acknowledge total depravity, in the Calvinist sense of meaning, does not mean we are as bad as we can possibly be.

To acknowledge that we are sinners is to recognize that something is broken that we can't fix for ourselves. To acknowledge *total depravity* is recognize that there's nothing in our lives that is exempt from the effects of sin.

Sin is a tough topic. To think of it means we have to look at what is wrong – in the world, in our lives, in our relationships. Nothing about talking about sin is easy. Indeed in the preface to his wonderful book, Not The Way It's Supposed to Be, a Breviary of Sin, Cornelius Plantinga acknowledges that to look deeply into sin, one risks being unable to get back out.

But if we're going to think seriously, theologically, about such important matters as violence, sex, money, politics, and ecology, we need a foundation.

We need to understand sin.

Here is how I propose we proceed today: I am going to talk about sin in three ways: as a broken relationship with God, as defacement of the imago dei, and as vandalism of Shalom. We will not be able to cover the length and width of Christian thought on sin –

this is merely a primer. And perhaps most importantly, we will not end with sin, we will end with redemption because that is the way in which God intends us to end.

So let's begin with sin as a broken relationship.

In the nineteenth century, there was an analogy for God that became rather popular with a school of thought called *deism* that suggested that God is a disinterested party where creation is concerned – God made creation and set it running and retired to a distance to watch us tick. Essentially, God was portrayed as a cosmic clockmaker who put it all together, started it running and stepped aside.

The problem with this analogy should be obvious to anyone who has read the opening chapters of Genesis. That's not the way the story went.

Now the story of how we came to be is not natural history. It's not intended to be. From the Genesis creation stories we are intended to draw some broad theological conclusions. And one of the most evident is that God is deeply, intimately involved in what God is creating. Indeed, the best translations of the Hebrew *Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'arets* which begins our Bible is more like this, "At the start of it all, God began creating... "

God's creative activity isn't limited to a one-time event wherein it was all started and finished and God left, but rather, God started creating and God keeps creating. God is not done with creation.

Creation is God's ongoing activity, and so it is God's ongoing relationship with everything.

And yet the story goes that we rebelled.

Classically, this is often called the fall and it forms the basis for much of the medieval theology of original sin with which the church struggled. It is an interesting side eddy, to my mind, so we are not going to talk about it today.

What is important for us to know is that in the beginning, God started creating the world in which we live and we are created with the intention of a good relationship with God who is intimately involved in the creation – at every stage, God proclaimed creation created and called it good, but when it came to humans, God breathed the breath of life into our clay. There's a big difference between proclamation and the intimate act of breathing life into the creature. That's the sort of relationship God wanted and God wants.

And then the story goes, we wanted more.

God created us for genuine community, but we wanted more.

That may just be sin in a nutshell. God created us to be human – in the image of God – but we wanted more, to be as God – to be creators for ourselves not reliant on God's goodness.

Perhaps it doesn't sound so bad, does it? All we really wanted was autonomy. All we really wanted was to be independent... to be our own people... by ourselves... the rugged individual...

But that's not what God made us to be.

It brings us to the second point about sin that we need to understand. Sin is the defacement of the *imago dei*. In the same pages of scripture where we read about the creation we read as well that God made humanity in God's image.

Now, theologians disagree on this one – but I find most compelling the belief that when God made us in God’s image it is that we are made to be in communion with God and with each other. Without going too deeply in to the finer points of Trinitarian theology, God has defined God’s very own being in such a way that connectedness and community is who God is – we use the language of Father, Son and Holy Ghost in order to understand the persons of the trinity, and the yet we affirm at the same time that God is one. God’s very own understanding of self is of inextricable, inviolable community. And God made us in God’s image.

When we make a declaration of independence from God and each other, we deface that image.

I mentioned theologians disagree on this one – the disagreement is primarily about whether or not what it means to be in God’s image is to be made for a fellowship of love. The reason I find this definition so compelling is because of the words of Jesus – when asked what is the greatest commandment, what is the heart of the Law that God gave to define God’s people, the answer was a resounding affirmation of the relationship between God and humankind and each other – Jesus’ turned us back to the heart of the law – back to the heart of God’s way for God’s people, and it looked just like what God created in creation – love God, love each other... all of the time. That’s what it means to be human. To be fully human, to live fully as God created us to live means to live in inviolable fellowship with one another and God. Anything less defaces God’s image.

And that brings us to our third point about sin.

The broken relationship with God defaces God’s image in us and it leads us to the vandalism of Shalom.

Shalom is more than merely a greeting, though many of us hear it that way. Shalom as a greeting is a well-wishing, a hope that the hearer will experience the peaceable well-being that comes only from God.

It may be a bit simplistic to think of it this way, but if the broken relationship with God and the defacement of God's image within our humanity represents sin as a state of being from which we cannot escape, then the vandalism of shalom represents sin as action – the actions that harm ourselves and others – and destroy the well-being that God wishes for the world. Sin as the vandalism of shalom is the consequence of placing ourselves above God and neighbor. War, lust, covetousness, murder, lies – these are the actions which condemn us.

Perhaps it is helpful to borrow an analogy from medicine. The first two – broken relationship and defacement of God's image, they are the disease. The last, vandalism of Shalom, is the symptom.

They're all deadly.

No matter whether symptom or disease, sin cuts us off from God.

But, you might think to yourself, I don't do any of those things. I'm free of lust, I don't support war, I've never murdered anyone, and I tell the truth.

We still all live in a world that is marred and disfigured by sin. When we participate in any way in broken creation, we participate in sin.

This isn't as good as it gets. God created us for better.

Sin is not the way it is supposed to be. Even if there isn't visible vandalism of Shalom, the fabric of what God has made isn't being made stronger.

When we participate in a way of life that is less than God wants, that is sin.

It may seem odd that in a sermon on sin I have managed to avoid mentioning the really juicy stuff – you know, fornication, adultery, usury, lying, cheating, stealing, the list could go on and on. Whatever they are, they are at their heart the result of the underlying problem of sin. It's really just a question of degrees.

Which is not to say that some sins aren't more hurtful than others. They are. But it is to say that whatever the sin is it's still sin.

I hope the end result of this treatment hasn't been to take something that is nasty, hurtful, demeaning, degrading and destroying and turn it into a garden-variety annoyance.

It would be so easy to think that it's just not a big deal.

Not if we have any idea of who God is.

God is holy. And God is the creator God who is still creating. Sin cuts us off from what is holy. Sin cuts us off from God. Sin cuts us off from the full humanity that God wills for us.

But here is the good news of the Gospel: God does not reject us. Whatever the nature of our sin, God does not reject us.

Maybe it's our sinful nature overruling the humanity for which God created us, but we seem so much to be obsessed with the sin of others. So much of what hurts, degrades and humiliates us is the sin that, to borrow a phrase from Paul, clings to us so closely.

I love the old chestnut that says, "Don't judge me because I sin differently than you do."

We may reject others because of the sin we perceive, but God does not reject them. We may reject ourselves because of our own sin, but God does not reject us.

Indeed that is the heart of the Gospel, God does not reject us.

That is grace.

Whatever our faith teaches us about sin, whatever we have to say about the brokenness of our relationship with God and with each other, whatever word we have to say about the vandalism of Shalom and the defacement of the imago dei, it is a subordinate word because it always stands under the Word of God that supercedes our sin.

Sin is powerful. And sin is ugly. But there is more grace and mercy in God than there is sin in us.

There are many analogies that are used for grace: some liken it to winning the lottery without having bought a ticket. I love this threefold definition: grace is the unmerited, unearned, unconditional love of God.

Paul Tillich says it this way,

“Grace is the reunion of life with life, the reconciliation of the self with itself. Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected. Grace transforms fate into meaningful destiny; it changes guilt into confidence and courage. There is something triumphant about the word ‘grace’: in spite of the abounding of sin, grace abounds much more.”¹

Sin matters. Grace exceeds sin.

If you have ever been terribly wronged, you know that the answer, “Oh it was nothing, don’t worry about it,” is a lie and it rings false.

God’s answer to sin is not false. In Jesus Christ, God took all of the brokenness, defacement and vandalism of sin onto God’s own self so that we would no longer have to bear it. That is grace.

We have an empty cross in our sanctuary to remind us of it. The cross is empty but it wasn’t always. And that is the point. Whatever we have to say about sin, whether we are

¹ Tillich, Paul. The Shaking of the Foundations. (Scribners, NY, 1948) P156

talking about sex, money, politics, ecology, violence – or whatever – we say it in light of that empty cross. Anything less cheapens it. Anything less is not grace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.