

Webs of Sin—2nd Sunday after Pentecost (Juneteenth)

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[Isaiah 65:1-9](#)

[Psalm 22:19-28](#)

[Galatians 3:23-29](#)

[Luke 8:26-39](#)

Sermon delivered at Christ the Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Hamden, CT

In Luke's gospel we have an arresting portrait of Sin today. Sin here is like a scary, demonic outside force that has taken over. Sin drives us away from community to the tombs, to dead places. This morning, as a nation, we celebrate both the love of family on Father's Day and also the joy of freedom and liberation on Juneteenth ... But... our lessons from Scripture are about Sin. That barrier of selfishness between us and God, and those *systems* and interlocking webs of selfishness that hurt others.

We have many portraits of sin in Scripture today—God, through the prophet Isaiah, passionately describes reaching out to love a selfish humanity. The Psalmist this morning cries out, suffering from the effects of sin— violence, which is called here “the power of the sword,” and poverty, the willful economic exploitation of others. And in Paul's letter to the folks in Galatia he alludes to the sinful way humans exclude each other: ethnicity, enslavement, and gender.

As Lutheran-flavored Christians, we have a very useful way of talking about and measuring sin. We draw on what Paul wrote to his church in Galatia: “We were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came...” The law, we like to say, is what reveals sin to us. The vision of communal life that God gave to Moses for the people is the traditional way we think of the law, which is summed up as the 10 commandments.

And the 10 commandments many of you know.

1. No gods before God.
2. Don't use God's name to make promises you won't keep.
3. Honor God by taking a break from work, a.k.a. the Sabbath day,
4. Respect your parents—an important one today...
5. Don't kill.
6. No adultery—God commands that we protect and respect our relationships.

7. Don't steal.
8. Don't lie.
9. and 10) Don't desire or use schemes to get what does not belong to you.

These are our tests for Sin. And as individual humans, but *especially* as groups of humans—**we fail the test.**

Martin Luther, our namesake, wrote extensively on the law. He wrote a guide on this and other matters for teachers called the Large Catechism. I'd like to read to you from his exposition on the commandment: "do not steal" to show you how serious Luther was about the law being an expansive, inclusive measurement of sin.

What Luther writes about theft is especially important today, given the increasingly difficult *economic situation* we are in. And because today, as a nation, we celebrate the anniversary of African Americans being liberated from an economic situation in our country's history, called slavery. And suffice it to say that many Black Americans still, are, by sinful policies, both historical and current, held behind their white American counterparts in regards to income, homeownership, education, and many other markers.

So, Luther on the commandment: "Do not steal." —

After our person and [spouse], temporal property is the nearest good. That also God wishes to have secure, and has commanded that no one shall damage or injure his neighbor in his possessions. For to steal is nothing else than to get another's property wrongfully into our possession. This comprehends all kinds of advantage in all kinds of trade to the disadvantage of our neighbor. This is indeed such a widespread and common crime, but so little regarded and observed, that it exceeds all measure, so that if all thieves—who nevertheless do not wish to be considered such—were to be hanged to the gallows, the world would soon be desolate and would be without both executioners and gallows!

In the market and in common trade this course prevails to the greatest extent, where one openly defrauds another with defective goods...or dexterous inventions, in short by getting the best of the bargain and wantonly oppressing and distressing [one's neighbor]. And who indeed can even recount or imagine it all? This is, in short, the most general trade and the largest guild on earth, and if we regard the world through all conditions of life it appears to be only a vast, wide stall, full of great thieves.

Luther goes on:

...the poor are daily overcharged, new burdens and high prices are imposed, and everyone uses the market according to his caprice, and is even defiant and brags as though it were his fair privilege and right to sell his goods for as high a price as he please...

I think you can hear what Luther is saying: The whole world is run by economy, and economy is run by exacting good deals for oneself and one's business. He calls this all theft! He goes on further:

But let them know that in the sight of God they are the greatest thieves, who also will punish them as they deserve and are worthy.

After more of a tirade, Luther finishes this way:

Therefore, let everyone know that it is [their] duty, at the risk of God's displeasure, not only to do no injury to [their] neighbor, nor to deprive [them] of gain, nor to perpetrate any act of unfaithfulness or malice in any bargain or transaction of trade, but faithfully to preserve [their] property for [them], to secure and promote [their neighbors] advantage...

Now, you can see I think how just this one little commandment shows how seriously vast is Sin. It is an attitude of total selfishness, but it is also a web, a web of people and systems and customs, so big that it doesn't seem that any one person could belong to it. And in our day and age, these webs are alive and well.

Juneteenth commemorates the day in 1865 when the announcement of General Order No. 3 emancipating all enslaved people was finally proclaimed to the last folks to hear in Texas. *That was only 157 years ago!* Only a handful of generations ago. And the webs of economic advantage and disadvantage that sprawl out from our history are still, in many ways, intact!

Luther says if you're not helping to alleviate, you are consenting to the damage, and still are guilty. There is no escape. Sin is everywhere. It's built into the fabric of ours, and all nations: cruelty, slavery, prejudice and racism, lies and polarization, economic corruption, adultery, murder and indifference to murder. We are stuck.

Or, as the author of Luke's Gospel so artfully shows us: we are possessed.

A fair question is: "What can be done?" Depending who you ask, you get different answers. The political Right says, "What problem? There's no injustice here." The political Left says, "We'll fix it ourselves, and fast!" One is denial, the other great hubris.

The only solution—we confess as Christ's Church—the only hope we have is the hope of the man possessed by "legion" in Luke. We are stuck, but God is not. God has taken a boat over to

our side, Christ has journeyed and meets us here, in the places of the dead. Because here we are out of our minds, possessed, and abandoned to the tombs of sin.

In our class on Lutheranism the past month we talked a lot about Grace. Grace is a fancy word for gift. And when as Christians we use it, we mean that God's forgiveness of all this sin is a gift. That does not mean that we get forgiveness for free. It means that we can't earn it. We have to drop to our knees, stricken by the immensity of the selfish and violent webs we are caught in, that we consent to, and cry out for God's mercy and pardon—mercy and pardon we don't deserve, and yet we are granted, freely, as grace.

Paul writes: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

Here comes God, over the wide lake to meet us in Gerasene. God becoming flesh as Jesus to meet us. Christ becoming bread and wine for us to experience. The Holy Spirit becoming our faith and our joy at this meeting.

Sitting here at Jesus' feet, we are indeed put back into our right minds, and we too are sent away, like the cured man this morning. Jesus says to us today: "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."

Amen.