

Sin as Separation—14th Sunday after Pentecost (God's Work. Our Hands. Sunday)

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[Exodus 32:7-14](#)

[Psalm 51:1-10 1](#)

[Timothy 1:12-17](#)

[Luke 15:1-10](#)

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

When it comes to the kind of lessons we have from Scripture this morning, when 3 out of 4 use the word “sin” or “sinner,” and the lesson from the Old Testament shows the people “acting perversely”—it seems important to revisit the idea of sin. What is it?

First, put the idea of Original Sin out of your mind for a second, that's not very helpful anymore.

The concept of sin of course comes from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible is the absolute foundation of our faith, and it is, more than anything else, the story of God's promise to Abraham. God promises to make Abe the ancestor of God's special people. God's special people are promised a place to live. God's special ones on the way to that land are given a special way of life. From Genesis to Exodus to Joshua to the prophets and so forth. It's all about the people living in, or not living in, the special place promised to Abraham. So what, right? What does that have to do with sin?

Well, God promises Abraham that God will always be his God. God makes a covenant, a contract, a promise. And when God's people are freed from enslavement in Egypt and are traveling slowly toward that special land in the wilderness, God promises to be right there with them as they go. Inside a tent, above the stone tablets that have their special rules and way of life written on them. God is there, not far away, but right there.

But since God is so special, so entirely holy and amazing, only holy people can go visit God. Sin, then, in the original sense, is something that would cause you to be separated, literally, from God. If you ate the wrong food, touched the wrong thing, or lied, cheated, killed or stole, all these things break God's special rules—and they would, therefore, put a barrier between you and God. You couldn't go into the tent and be near God. Before you could go in you had to make a sacrifice of something to atonement for your mistake, and be made clean by the priests. ***Sin, in its original sense, is separation from God.***

The people in our lesson from Exodus are impatient. Aaron, Moses' partner and their religious leader, is impatient. While Moses was up on the mountain, receiving all these laws and ways of life from God, all the people gave up! They needed something, something powerful and tangible to make them feel safe. So, Aaron makes them a golden calf statue, something familiar I'm sure from their time in Egypt, where many gods were depicted as animals. The people put the true God far from their minds. They are separated from God. They have sinned. See what I mean?

And the results of sin are just more separation. God, in this story, is painted with a very human paintbrush, and gets upset. Some clever folks have noticed that God is more likely testing Moses here. The people have sinned, the relationship is strained—God says to Moses, "What should we do? Should we and the people get a separation, Moses, and start over together?" Moses of course says no. Moses knows God, and trusts that God has made an unbreakable covenant with the people. Moses makes the case. God keeps the relationship alive. More separation is avoided.

And it's the same throughout all our lessons. The Psalmist talks about his bad behavior and needing to be washed as though they were the same thing—well, no wonder, right? Considering what we know about the special law for God's people being about eating, touching, being clean on the outside and being morally clean on the inside. The Psalmist feels separated from God. The Psalmist wants to be back with God so bad, and in a poetic flare, harkening back to the law, the Psalmist says, you can forgive me, you can wash me. When we are together again, the Psalmist sings, then I will rejoice.

Now, when it comes to the New Testament, to Jesus, things change a little, but it's all basically the same. The author of our second lesson in this letter is telling us that Paul was a sinner, he persecuted God's people that followed Jesus. Paul was separated from God by pride and violence. But Paul is used as an example to comfort others. A way of saying: you think you are separated from God, a sinner. That's nothing, look at me.

*I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that **Christ Jesus** came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.*

And that truly is what we believe, and how we believe it. Even if we feel separated from God and in Christ we trust, we are not. This takes us back to Original Sin actually. "Original Sin" is a theologian's phrase, it's an abbreviation for this whole separation-thing we have been talking about. In the Bible, in Genesis, the first humans are poetically imagined as a couple. And these first humans pretty soon get separated from God. They let themselves be deceived, they

quarrel with each other, they try to make themselves equal with God. "Original Sin" says: this story reflects the truth. There is just something about human beings where they always seem to get separated from God when left alone. They lie, steal, cheat, kill—and then lie some more to convince themselves that they'll be ok.

If any of you know your Bible very well, you'll remember that in Genesis, when this poetic Adam and Eve couple eat the fruit God asked them not to eat, they become aware of their nakedness, and **they hide!** They hide themselves from God. They make their own separation. Like the people in Exodus with Moses, they pick something else besides God.

And what does God do about this separation?

In Genesis, God goes looking for them in the garden. Does God need to look for them, technically no, God knows everything, obviously. But God in this story, like in Exodus today, God is also painted with human characteristics, to help illustrate God's true self. **God goes looking.** And later God makes a set of laws and rules that help people get re-connected. And we confess and believe as the Church that Christ Jesus came into the world to direct our sight to the forever-bridge that exists between us and God.

Through Christ there is no more separation, no more sin that can stick or sever us from God. God became flesh in Christ to find us, to show that God was never gone, never far.

That is what Jesus is talking about, with his parables for the grumbling Pharisees. This is what God is like, he says. God 1) notices we are separated, God 2) goes looking, then 3) when God finds, 4) God rejoices! It's very silly to leave 99 sheep alone to find 1. It's weird to throw a party if you only have 10 coins. These stories don't make logical sense. They make God-sense. God shouldn't forgive Paul; he was violently killing Jesus' followers. But God does. It doesn't make logical sense, says Paul in the letter, but it's mercy, it's grace—it only makes God-sense.

And that's the score. That's why we do what we do here in worship. God is here, we believe, in bread and wine, in the words of Scripture. When God is here, we call it the Holy Spirit. And if God is here... if God is not separated from us, that means God has forgiven us, there's no barriers between us—as near as your heartbeat, as near as your breath, God is there, looking and finding and celebrating.

All that's left for us to do is just let go of the rest and fall into this truth. All that's left for us to do is the same as the Psalmist and Paul, and the characters of Jesus' parables: We rejoice! We find joy! We have a party, we gather our family and friends together! If there is no separation between us and God, then why would there be any separation between us and our neighbors?

And that is what "God's Work. Our Hands." Sunday is all about. Today we are not working off our debts, or impressing God. We are not sacrificing or even performing a duty—all that is finished. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, says St. Paul. We are already saved. ***We need not do, or earn anything.***

But today we are doing, we will be working. But we do it, I know, out of joy. We are collaborating, and helping, and serving for no other reason than joy, and to share that joy. The joy of believing that God is here, in our community, in our world. The joy that the nightmare is over, we have awoken into an enchanted world where God is near, the sting of death is gone, and love and mercy are the DNA of all that ever was, is, or will be.

Amen.