

Church of the Crossroads
Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2006
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SPEAKING OF SIN

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51
John 12:20-33

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my
iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.

- Psalm 51:1-3

Transgression, iniquity, sin – these are words we no longer use very much in our mainline churches, except on the rare occasion, such as when we read or chant the words of the 51st Psalm. The language of sin and redemption is a language belonging to the past, or so we have come to believe. In fact, I suspect that except for churches of a higher liturgical tradition, such as Episcopal and Lutheran churches, most churches belonging to mainline Protestantism have even dropped the prayer of confession from their services in an effort to make worship more positive. We do not like to speak of sin, but prefer to go straight for the language of grace and forgiveness.

Yet, for all of our reluctance to use the language of sin, the reality of sin and alienation has not gone away. I'm not sure we should let go of these words so easily. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her little book *Speaking of Sin* (now you know where I got the title for the sermon) says that when we lose religious words that have held meaning in the past we are in danger of losing hold of the reality they represent.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the concept of sin has carried a depth of meaning. It has pointed to the serious reality of alienation – our

separation from God and neighbor. When we lose the language of sin and its deeper meaning, sin becomes synonymous with rule breaking. I recall Richard Nixon declaring that he had not sinned because he had not stolen any money. But sin is more than stealing money, or dancing, or playing cards on Sunday, or living together without benefit of marriage, or telling a white lie. These kinds of so-called sins can be traced not so much to the Bible as to culture. A sin, in the absence of its deeper meaning, is defined by whatever a particular group disapproves of.

Assuredly, there are the sins of omission and commission. We human beings do not do those things we ought to do and leave undone those things we ought to do. These sins, (or transgressions, in the language of the Bible) are far more serious than breaking rules. They are the kind of sins that result in alienation – the breaking of our relationship with God and with neighbor. And this alienation is precisely the deeper reality of sin. I am sure this kind of alienation is what the psalmist experienced when he or she cried out to God, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me.”

I remember well a family gathering a number of years ago. Actually, it was a gathering that took place following a memorial service. Into the gathering came a brother of the family, my extended family at the time, someone the family had not seen for twenty years, although he lived only a few miles away. I became curious, and asked, what was it that had kept this brother away from his family for so many years? The answer I received was startling. No one could remember the act that had caused the rift. It surely was, however, one of those sins of commission or omission, and not just the breaking of a moral rule. Sadly, it had resulted in a deep alienation and a silence that lasted for twenty years. I am glad to report that whatever was done (no one knows what it was) has been forgiven and the brother has been restored to his family.

Sin, of course, is not only doing those things we ought not to do and leaving undone those things we ought to do. This is the personal dimension of sin, but there is also a social dimension to sin. We may protest the eviction of the homeless from Ala Moana Park, as I did the other night when I had a heated exchange with the Mayor’s press secretary, but whether or not I want to admit it, the reality is that I myself create homelessness simply because I benefit from the economic structures that result in the impoverishment of far too many in our community. There are hardly any of

us who do not, in one way or another, participate in social, or corporate sinfulness. If we are going to open ourselves to the kind of world God desires, we need always to acknowledge this reality of our lives.

In its deepest sense, in both its personal and social dimensions, sin results in separation or alienation from God and neighbor, and in our day of ecological consciousness, our separation from the earth itself. Truly, this is the modern experience of sin, whether or not we use the language of sin.

But, then, why not use the language of sin, if it indeed points to this reality that is all too familiar to us? We human beings cry out for change. We want our old humanity to be transformed into a new humanity. We want the deaths we experience day to day to be transformed into new life. We want our experience of separation and alienation to be transformed into wholeness and restoration. We cry out for salvation, to use another of those old words.

Yet, we have put aside the language of sin, and we have replaced the language of salvation with words like *stress-reduction* and *empowerment* and *harmony*. Yet, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, these words are hardly an improvement over the older language. Stress reduction, sometimes achieved momentarily, is rarely achieved in the long run. Life is far too complicated for that. Furthermore, for all of our desire for personal empowerment, power remains a problem, and as for harmony, it is a “distant memory of life that ended a long time ago.” I may have fond memories of the harmony I experienced in my youth, but I can never return to it.

Somehow we should entertain the possibility of restoring the old language of sin and salvation, giving them once again the deep meaning they once had. Having said that, I acknowledge that too many of us have been wounded and hurt by the language of sin and salvation. Many who enter our faith community have been hurt in the past by the way in which the church has often used the concepts of sin and salvation in heavy handed ways, with the result that countless numbers of people have ended up not feeling good at all about themselves. We can hardly blame them for wanting to dispense with the language of sin.

At the same time, mainline churches have been far too eager to access the language of grace and forgiveness without coming to terms with the reality that grace and forgiveness addresses, and that is the reality of

personal and corporate sin. Somehow, we as a church need to speak of sin in a way that gets us in touch with the deeper issues of separation and alienation that plague us all.

One closing word. The language of Psalm 51, and also the language of Jeremiah are helpful. Both the psalm and the prophet speak of a change that begins with a changed heart. Jeremiah envisions a time when a new covenant, a new relationship between God and God's people will be written upon the hearts of God's people. And the Psalmist declares that what is necessary for forgiveness and newness of life is not the little things we do in an attempt to make things right. What is necessary is a broken and contrite heart. What is required is not more and more doing (how we are in love with doing at Church of the Crossroads, all in an attempt, I suspect, to make things right). What is required is a *new state of being* which begins with a broken and contrite heart. Says the psalmist,

For you have no delight in sacrifice;
if I were to give a burnt offering,
you would not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God
is a troubled spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
you will not despise.

- Psalm 51; 16,17

This, my friends, is the language of sin and salvation. I trust we will not set it aside, simply out of an attempt to be more positive. Instead, let us recognize the kind of separation and alienation that keeps us from newness of life, both personally and corporately. Let us acknowledge our own need for change, our own need for a new humanity. And may we set aside the illusion that we can make things right in our lives by getting in touch with the newest technique or program for personal growth and empowerment, or by expending our energy on trying to get rid of the little sins that do not matter in the long run. Rather, let us renew our lives through the renewing of our hearts, knowing, that if we are ready to acknowledge the sin that separates us from God and neighbor, God will be ready to greet us with grace and forgiveness. Thanks be to God.