

Church of the Crossroads  
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
February 4, 2007  
Neal MacPherson

## THE TURNING WITHIN

Isaiah 6:1-12  
Luke 5:1-11

This morning, we heard two stories about being called: the first, the call of Isaiah to prophetic ministry; and the second the call of the first disciples of Jesus. Perhaps you noticed a common theme shared by the two stories. As they are being called, both Isaiah and Peter are filled with an awareness of being sinful human beings. Isaiah says: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the Sovereign God of hosts!" And as the first disciples are called, Peter says, "Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"

This common element shared by both stories is intriguing. Why this feeling of sinfulness? What, exactly, is going on? At the close of our Monday gathering, the members of the Lectionary Study Group suggested that I preach a sermon on sin. It has been a long time since I have preached a sermon on the subject, and I must trust the instincts of the Lectionary Study Group, so here goes!

In liberal Protestant communities, sin is a subject seldom mentioned. Many congregations have done away with prayers of confession, feeling that any talk of sin is a bit too dark for modern Christians. Rather than talk about sin, preference is given to the softer language of human actualization or the process of fulfilling our human potential.

Speaking of sin, we have thought, belongs to a former age. This is a subject we are glad to turn over to Christians of a more conservative bent. Besides, many of us have in the past been deeply burdened by feelings of being sinful that came from parents and church authorities who warned us not to do this or do that lest we invoke the anger and wrath of God.

In conventional American Christianity, sin has been associated with the breaking of moral rules. An example: in the aftermath of Watergate,

Richard Nixon declared that he had not sinned because he had not stolen any money! Richard Nixon viewed sin as the breaking of moral rules, which included the moral rule that we shouldn't steal money but not, in his view, any restriction prohibiting cover-up or deception.

We all grew up with the idea of Christianity as a system of morality and sins as moral indiscretions of one kind or another. In the culture in which I grew up, the idea of sin even made its way into what was considered acceptable social behavior. One must never express one's anger. One must not question one's elders. One must always be polite, even though the word "polite" is not to be found anywhere in the Bible. I am thankful that I grew up in a household that was relatively free when it came to these ideas of sin. But the culture surrounding us surely re-enforced these notions of sin. Feelings of sinfulness resulted when we failed to live by the rules. But it's impossible to live by all the rules. Once we learned this, as we all do, we decided that the language of sin was no longer viable. No wonder we do not speak of sin!

There is, however, another view of sin that brings the subject closer to home. In this view, sin is not associated with the breaking of moral rules. Rather, it is associated with a feeling of being lost, a feeling of being alone, a feeling of purposelessness and despair, a feeling of brokenness, of "disease." These are the consequences of a turning away from that which gives life and wholeness. Sin, then, is "a turning away." This is the idea of sin that I believe is present in the words of Isaiah and Peter we heard this morning. "Woe is me," cries out Isaiah, "I am lost." Only then does Isaiah say that he is a man of unclean lips. It's not that Isaiah has broken any moral rules. He simply feels lost, out of relationship with God, one might say.

Neither has Peter in the Gospel story broken any rules. He simply felt overwhelmed by a feeling of unworthiness in the presence of Jesus. This feeling of unworthiness had arisen because of his lack of trust in Jesus. When Jesus asked him to lower his nets, Peter did so simply out of politeness and accommodation. Peter did not really believe that anything would come of it.

Now *trust* is a relational term. We place our trust in something,

perhaps, but how much better to place our trust in someone. When we are lost and alone, out of relationship, we cannot trust anyone; we cannot have faith in anyone.

Sin, in this sense, is indeed a turning away from the relationships that give life. It results in a feeling of brokenness, a feeling that we are out of relationship. That is why Peter feels that he is a sinful man. Something then happens in Peter, as it probably also happened in Isaiah. It also involves a turning, but a turning towards that which heals and restores. It is a turning within. Somehow the brokenness is healed. Somehow, surely by the grace of God, the broken relationship is mended. Aloneness is replaced by communion. The feeling of being lost is replaced by a feeling of being at home. The feeling of purposelessness is replaced by a sense of purpose. The feeling of “dis-ease” is replaced by a sense of wholeness.

It is a turning within. We turn from our “lostness” and towards home, from our brokenness and towards wholeness.

I cannot speak for you, but this is the language of sin that describes my life, and perhaps yours. For we live in a culture that seems to foster the experience of being alone and without purpose, the feeling of being lost, the feeling of being out of relationship, out of relationship with God, with one another, and with the earth itself. So much of the time, we find ourselves alone, wandering about, lost. The Gospel invites us to turn around, to come home.

When true simplicity is gained,  
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed;  
to turn, turn will be our delight  
'til by turning, turning, we come round right.

The title of David Korten's newest book is *The Great Turning: from Empire to Earth Community*. Everywhere, and more and more, we are witnessing the desire of people to make this great turning. We are tired of empire. We are tired of the United States acting unilaterally in the world just like an empire. We are tired of corporatism. We are tired of profits being made without regard to the poor who make the profit possible in the first place, and the toll that greed wreaks upon the earth. We are tired of being tired to hierarchies of one kind or another. We are tired of seeing our earth fall into ruin. We are tired of feeling separated from one another, from

the earth, and from a divine purpose, however we may describe it. More and more people want to turn towards a sense of connection and oneness with the sacred dimension of life, with the Holy One, with the human community and with the earth itself.

This is a new kind of desire that is being articulated by many. Even ten years ago we did not speak quite this way. We could not articulate our desire quite so clearly. We were still burying our heads in the sand. We were still filled with optimism. In the words of Isaiah's message, we were looking without seeing, and hearing but not comprehending. Now we are coming to know better. We are lost and alone, and we want to be at home and together.

And yet, our stories today inform us that if the great turning in our world is to take place, what is really required is a turning within, an inner transformation, and inner turning from disconnection and brokenness and towards a restored relationship with God, the earth, and one another. It happens only by grace, I believe. We know it happened for Isaiah and for Peter. From a sense of being lost, Isaiah ends up offering himself for prophetic ministry. And as for those fishermen, they leave their nets and their boats behind in order to follow Jesus. It can happen and is perhaps happening also for us.

Now, I am glad for our community of faith here at Church of the Crossroads, for it is here, with one another, that we can act upon the great turning that is needed in our world and also the turning within. In her little book *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor takes note of Douglas John Hall's idea that what eats away at us in our time is the gnawing suspicion that we human beings may be superfluous – an accidental species with no real purpose on earth, and it is this feeling of being superfluous, of being the problem, that contributes to our feeling of being lost and alone and broken. Building on this language of Douglas John Hall, Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

. . . the church exists so that God has a community in which to save people from meaninglessness, by reminding them who they are and what they are for. The church exists so that God has a place to point people toward a purpose as big as their capabilities, and to help them identify all the ways they flee from that high call. The church exists so that people have

a community in which they may confess their sin- their own turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them – as well as a community that will support them to turn back again. The church exists so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where – having repented – they may be restored to fullness of life.

- Speaking of Sin, p. 85

May we always be that kind of community, not speaking of sin in terms of all those little do's and don'ts, but willing to acknowledge our brokenness, our "lostness," our loneliness, our fears, and our isolation, so that we may turn within towards God and one another and God's good creation. So will we then contribute to that great turning so needed in our world, which surely constitutes the call to discipleship in our time. Such a turning is never easy, and yet it is the one thing we need to do if there is to be a future for our children and our children's children. And one day, perhaps, we will be able to look back on our turning and find ourselves singing the song once again, the one we already sang this morning, the one that says, "to turn, turn will be our delight, 'til by turning, turning, we come down right."