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Progress and the Strange Persistence of Guilt

Romans 2:1-12; 5:1-11

For the past month we've been talking about pseudo-Christianities: sort of Christian-ish expressions of faith that flourish in our culture and that might even be mistaken for Christianity, but aren't quite. Most of the examples I've given – jingoistic Patriotism in the name of Christ or the cult of "Family Values," for instance – are found most often among Conservative churches. So, in the interest of balance, today I'm going to offend liberals. I want to talk about sin – yes, that United Methodist four-letter word – and I'm going to say that genuine Christianity cannot be separated from the teaching that sin is real, that it affects all humanity, that we cannot *fix* it ourselves, and that somehow, through Christ, God has done that for us.

The fact is, the problem of human sin is at the heart of the story of the Bible, and the only way to read our scripture without seeing that is to use a strobe light. Immediately after the story of Creation, we have the story of sin in the Garden. Adam and Eve sin through pride (wanting to be like gods themselves) through rebellion (eating the forbidden fruit) and through dishonesty and cowardice (appropriately, the first sin is followed by the first lame excuse and attempt to blame someone else). That story is followed immediately by an avalanche of sin, increasing exponentially as humans increase in number, with the result that humanity – created to be in fellowship with God – is willfully separated instead. The rest of the Bible is, at heart, the story of God's attempts to heal that separation, and the climax of God's work comes in the Gospels, which describe how God bridges the separation physically, coming to earth in human form, as Jesus of Nazareth. The rest of the New Testament sets out to explain that healing, as in these passages from Paul's letter to the Romans. First, Paul describes the reality of sin and judgment.

We read Romans, chapter 2, verses 6-12.

⁶For [God] will repay according to each one's deeds: ⁷to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; ⁸while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. ⁹There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, ¹⁰but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. ¹¹For God shows no partiality. ¹²All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

Paul describes the remedy for this judgment three chapters later, in Romans 5:6-11:

⁶For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. ⁸But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. ⁹Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled,

will we be saved by his life. ¹¹But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

So, in summary, the reality and the power of sin are essential elements of Christian teaching, and they have been from the start, for better or worse. Sadly, often it has been for worse, and much that the church has taught about sin has been neither biblical nor healthy. There's the version of "Original Sin" taught by St. Augustine, for instance – that ever since the wicked Eve tricked virtuous Adam into eating the forbidden fruit – Women! – that taint of sin has been transmitted to all humanity through sex, which is basically a conduit for evil. Yes, that's what Augustine said. No, it's not what the Bible says. Or again there was John Calvin, 16th century president of the St. Augustine Fan Club, who took Augustine's disgust with humanity and turned it up to eleven. The Calvinist teaching of Total Depravity says that every trace of good was wiped out of us by Original Sin, leaving every human pure vermin. The only way any human is saved from the fires of hell is if that human happens to be one of the random few that God picks out of the batch for his bug collection. (That's not *exactly* how Calvin described the Doctrine of Predestination, but it's what he meant.) And in our own day we have seen people using the idea of a sin as a bludgeon – always taken up to condemn selective "sins" that afflict other people – conveniently ignoring Jesus' specific instruction that under absolutely no circumstances are we to judge others. Indeed, one of the greatest sins of the Church of Jesus Christ is the tremendous psychological, emotional, and spiritual harm we've inflicted on the vulnerable in the name of "sin."

So it's no wonder that many of us have swung to the opposite extreme, denying the reality of sin entirely because we don't want to be party to the abusive and manipulative use of guilt that has too often characterized the church. In fact, many have concluded that the church was the source of guilt, and that the only way to be free from the guilt of sin is to get rid of Christianity. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche took that view in his book *On the Genealogy of Morals*. The only way to eliminate oppressive guilt is to kill the church, Nietzsche said, so he declared that God was dead. Nietzsche's contemporary, Sigmund Freud, took a similar approach. Guilt, Freud said, was a sign of psychological disorder – made worse by religion's harping on sin – and part of treating such illness involved eliminating all moral judgment. Both agreed that people would be better off without religious notions of "sin," and looked forward to the time when science would replace faith once and for all. This notion is still around. Last week I mentioned the book I'm reading called *The Moral Order*, by a sociologist named Raoul Naroll, who believes that faith is doomed and that one day soon we will establish a new, rational, universal moral consensus on earth. People aren't sinful, Naroll believes: just insufficiently rational. The solution is apply more Reason, explaining clearly the benefits of his new, scientific model of morality. Then people will gladly accept it, and will live together in peace. "I'd like to teach the world to sing, in perfect harmony . . ."

I laugh, but the liberal mainline progressive church has often uncritically adopted this, ah, *optimistic* perspective. We have replaced that icky word "sin" with less judgmental terminology. We've talked about "poor choices" and "settling for less than our best," We want to be supportive and encouraging; we don't want to be abusive guilt-merchants, like so many have

been before. So, like Nietzsche and Freud and Naroll, we just avoid the subject of sin, hoping that guilt will go away on its own.

But it hasn't worked. In the century since Freud and Nietzsche our world has become much more secular, but guilt has not gone away. I read an article a couple of years ago called, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt." The author pointed out, as I have today, that people once thought that if we could just get rid of religion, guilt would go away, but studies show that, if anything, it has increased. People may not feel guilty about the same things, but there's always something to feel guilty about, and people do. Have you seen this advertisement before?

[Show video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lm-ZMB3kzaw>]

There is not one thing religious about this ad. It's not for a church, or even a social program; it's an ad for an insurance company. But it rings true. All around us are needs, from homelessness to global warming to abandoned puppies, and – here's the fascinating thing – what the commercial takes for granted is that the human being sees the need of others and instinctively feels that he should be doing about it. And if he isn't, then he feels guilty. To put it another way, we have this conviction that we are supposed to be something better, kinder, nobler than we are, and we aren't sure what to do about that.

That's the Christian teaching of sin: something's wrong with us. We were created in the image of God. We were supposed to be friends and companions to a God who is love. But somehow we have screwed that up. No, I don't know how that happened. Let the professional theologians puzzle on that one; it keeps them off the streets. What matters is that we have somehow smeared that original image of God with our own willfulness and selfishness and shocking capacity for cruelty. At some level, we know we're supposed to be better than this, but we aren't, and we don't know how to fix it. It feels as if we don't choose sin so much as sin chooses us. It's not a matter of being ignorant; we can't educate ourselves out of sin. Brilliant, educated, rational human beings designed machine guns, mustard gas, atomic bombs, and Auschwitz. I read Raoul Naroll's prediction that one day human beings will come together in peace and harmony under a rational moral order, and I thought, "Have you ever actually *met* any human beings?" Establish a universal moral code, and the first thing I'm going to want to do is break it, and I'm a *nice* guy. In Romans 7, Paul says, "The good that I want to do is the thing I don't do, and the evil that I swear I'm not going to do is exactly what I end up doing. Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

What do we do, then? Well, here's what Christianity teaches. We accept on trust that somehow the God who created us to love still does so. In spite of ourselves. We throw ourselves on God's mercy and believe that this God wants nothing better than to heal us, to lift us to our feet again, raise our chins, and grant us the gift of looking true goodness in the face, as we were always meant to do. We believe that somehow this irresistible love, this restoration, this redemption, was opened up to the world by God becoming one of us, living and dying as one of us, and then breaking through the chains of death as none of us could do without him. That's what we trust in. That's Christianity.

Some Christians seem to feel that our message to the world is “You’re sinners!” That’s not our message. People already know that. They know there’s something missing and don’t need to be told again by mean-spirited, bad-tempered, self-righteous prigs. Others apparently think our message is, “No, you’re fine! There’s nothing wrong. We’re all beautiful just as we are; we just need to accept that.” And that’s not our message either. We’re *not* all beautiful, and there *is* something wrong, and people know that. Have you watched the news? Have you looked at Twitter? No, there’s something wrong with us. For lack of a better name, call that something “sin.” No, our message is this: there is something wrong with us, but nothing that is enough to separate us from the love of God, or that makes it impossible for us to accept that love and begin to heal. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us,” Paul says. Thanks be to God.

Final Word: An old friend told me about the sign that was over the door of her home church. It said, “Only sinners are welcome here.” I like that. Important to keep out the non-riff-raff. The Church isn’t equipped to deal with people who don’t sin. But for the rest, we do actually have something to offer: hope, forgiveness, love. Amen.