

Covenant Word

Defining 'Sinner'

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28, I Timothy 1:12-17, Luke 15:1-10

A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
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Pastor
Sunday
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(Barbara Brown Taylor's book, Speaking of Sin was instrumental in developing this sermon.)

During the sermon, the pastor will ask several times:
"Why did Jesus Christ come?"

The congregation will respond, each time, with:
"Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners"

scriptures and referred to themselves as 'The People of God' or 'A Family of Faith,' 'God's Children' or 'Kingdom Dwellers.'

While the definitions might have been different, I did find comfort in the fact that at least the lingo was familiar. I also found it to be consistent that while most every one talked about 'grace,' no one talked about 'sin.'

'Sin' is increasingly becoming a part of a small cluster of words that seem to be hard for many people to articulate in our great, big culture, as well as in our individual churches not to mention our own personal lives. "Sin" heads this list, followed by "eternal damnation," "iniquity," "transgression," "repentance," "penance" and "salvation." (Taylor)

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book, Speaking of Sin, says:

"It is easier (and less painful) for us to rely on God's forgiveness of our sins than it is to believe that God might support us to quit them. But how can we quit them if we have forgotten what they are called?"

Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton

As we visited in other congregations this summer, I became increasingly aware of the fact that communities of faith have their own personal language. Language is, after all, a particular community's way of making meaning over time. It is shaped by that community's shared historical experiences, and it is loaded with that community's values. (Taylor)

Talking about sin is fraught with difficulty. For one thing, sin has many meanings for Christians. It is a word we use to name a wide variety of things, ranging from individual wrongdoings to social injustice to the DNA fallibility of being human.

For instance, while Grace Episcopal Church in New York used the term 'welcoming' to mean that any person could be a part of their fellowship, Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia used 'welcoming' to mean that only those who varied slightly in skin color could be a part of their fellowship. While Believer's Christian Fellowship in Harlem used 'congregational singing' to mean swaying, dancing, lifting of hands, singing from memory and accompaniment by drums, tambourines, and electronic organ; 'congregational singing' to Riverside Baptist meant hymnbook holding, standing in your place while the pipe organ filled the room. The Quaker congregation did not call themselves a church at all. They were, instead, a 'Meeting House.' They did not accept the authority of Scripture. The moving of the Spirit was their authority. Other congregations faithfully revered the

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a wide variety of things, ranging from individual wrongdoings to social injustice to the DNA fallibility of being human. For instance, when I say 'sin,' what comes to your mind? Perhaps it is a stolen candy bar from the store or a quarter from you Dad's dresser. It could be the rumpled sheets of a bed in which we slept with someone else's love; a large pipe spilling orange sludge into a once-blue river; a line of cocaine on the coffee-table; the homeless sitting around a fire in a vacant lot that is located between two sets of glitzy corporate headquarters. The picture will be different for every one of us, but the experiences to which I refer are those choices wherein a part of our soul is so alienated that it is threatened with death. (Taylor)

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Another problem in talking about sin is that what is called sinful in one household of faith may not be called sinful in another. Sin often comes embedded with such a strong set of cultural values, that sin turns out to be whatever a particular group decides



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should be disapproved of, like class, creed, gender, sexual orientation and ethnicity. As selected Bible passages are offered to support the group's definition, the language of sin becomes exclusive. This makes it difficult to possess any awareness of the possibility that God's values may turn out to be vastly different from the ones the group is touting. (Taylor)

Those of us raised Southern Baptist carry our own kind of guilt about sin. Kevin Jennings, in his memoir, Mama's Boy, Preacher's Son, explains it, with tongue in cheek, when he says:

...Southern Baptist guilt is little understood. Urban sophisticates would laugh in 1976 when presidential candidate Jimmy Carter, in an interview with *Playboy* magazine during which he was asked if he'd committed adultery, said he had "lusted in his heart after other women." They laughed because they didn't get it. We did. For Southern Baptists, *thinking* you want to commit a sin is just as bad as actually committing it. <To us> They're <one and> the same. And God writes them all down, time, day, and date, and reads them all back to you on Judgment Day before the final verdict on your immortal soul is rendered. It doesn't matter if you actually *do* anything; you get to feel guilty and you get to go to hell even if you never act on your evil desires.

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Whether our guilt comes from a thought or a deed, I would imagine we have all experienced those times when what we did or said or thought caused us or others alienation. There is some burning memory of having been treated cruelly, or of having treated someone else cruelly. Deep down there is the experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you could or any number of other things. It is that experience of doing whatever is necessary to feed and comfort the self, because we think there is no one else to trust, no other purpose to serve, and no other god to follow. For ages and ages, this experience has been called sin--the deadly alienation from the source of all life, who may be less concerned with specific behaviors as with the aftermath of those behaviors, whose ripple effect causes more and more alienation within ourselves and others. (Taylor)

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In the novel, The Witness of St. Ansqar's, Brother Benigno is explaining to his assistant, a teenager, Mario what the feeling of sin is like:

"Take off one of your shoes, Mario."

Mario unlaced the shoe and took it off.

"Now pull off your stocking." Benigno picked up Mario's shoe and dropped a small stone into it.

"Okay, now put on the shoe, lace it up, and walk."

Mario walked the length of the second sacristy. He didn't know what to expect. For a time he felt nothing, and then gradually as the pebble worked its way along

the inside of his shoe, he awoke to the bite of its sharp edges. At first it was merely uncomfortable and then painful; he began to favor his foot, limp, shake the foot, trying to dislodge the stone from his flesh. And then he stopped walking, lifted his foot to ease the discomfort and <yet> he still felt the sharp bite, the memory of the pain. It had entered his consciousness. "That's all, Mario. It hurt you, huh? Suppose you have that small stone in your conscience where it keeps biting you, cutting you, always stinging you."

Then Benigno leaned down, untied Mario's shoe and removed the rock. An image that was not wasted on Mario for he recognized it as the very act of redemption that explained the importance of Jesus' death on the cross. For

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In I Timothy, in order to mentor a young preacher, the apostle Paul gives his confession that prior to his conversion experience on the Damascus Road, he had been a man of such devout religious fervor, that he had used his religiosity to attempt the physical destruction of Jesus' followers. He calls himself, therefore, "foremost among sinners" and openly recognizes that this is why Jesus had to come into this world.

Now I do not know about you, but I do not personally know anyone like Paul who has persecuted the church. It makes my understanding of sin and grace to be cerebral and not visceral. So let me tell you about another sinner that I know with whom we may more closely relate. She has had every opportunity that anyone could imagine. She was raised in a warm, loving, Christian home. (The following idea is adapted from William Willimon, "Jesus Came for Sinners, Only Sinners," Pulpit Resource, September 16, 2007) She attended good schools where she was the beneficiary of attentive, skilled teachers. Most of her way was paid through college because of conscientious grandparents who had left sufficient inheritances. She has worked in a succession of places that were better than she deserved. She wrote, and her words were published through several publishing houses. She was invited to speak and teach at important conventions and conferences. She was even paid for doing these things that she enjoyed and for which she was gifted. She lives in a beautiful home, has a devoted and loving husband, fun and healthy children.

In scripture, the words often used to describe sin and grace are "lost and found."

She has never embezzled, stolen, lied, committed adultery or suffered an addiction. But she has done things far worse. This woman is a notorious sinner.

She is full of egotistical pride. She tends to take too much credit for her achievements, as if they were her own, sole personal

accomplishments. She presumes to know and speak the word of God, when her own stories often place the focus on irrelevant people rather than to glorify God. She is full of judgment and often takes secret delight in the downfall of those who have been critical of her. She sets a standard so high that, in reality, she sets up others to fail. She opens her mouth and biting sarcasm is often covered up with humor. She is known to be so excessive in her consumptions that she does not think twice about the violence that is visited upon the earth or that may enter into others' lives because of her materialism. Now she is quick to lend a helping hand, bring a few canned goods, pick up some school supplies or even pay another's power bill, but she is unwilling to approach the political powers that could bring about systemic change. She has deceived people into thinking that she is basically a kind and considerate person. When in reality, she is a master at manipulating others to get what she wants. She has gotten more than she deserves and, even worse, she acts as if she deserves it all, and more. This woman is a sinner and her name is Sarah Shelton.

And yet, for all of these sins, Paul tells Timothy that there is a good word from the Lord.

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<go down>

In scripture, the words often used to describe sin and grace are "lost and found." These conjure up stories like lost sheep, lost coins, and lost boys.

Fred Craddock ([Craddock Stories](#), Fred Craddock, p. 34) adds a story to this list when he tells stories of growing up on a 63 acre farm in Appalachia with his sister and brothers. Many times they would entertain themselves by playing hide-and-seek. You remember how it goes. One person is "It." Whoever is "It" hides their eyes, counts to a hundred, and then says, "Ready or not, here I come!" While they are counting, the other children scatter to hide. Then the person who is "It" looks and searches and tries to find each one's hiding place so that they can beat the one found back to the base in order to touch the base first and say, "You're 'It'!" And then, the other person has to be "It."

Well, on this particular day, his sister was "It." Craddock says of her, "She started out honest enough. She counted, 'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven...' but then she cheated, 'ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred! Ready or not, here I come!'" And she was off. She could not, however, find Fred. Fred had a secret place to hide. Because he was so much smaller than everyone else, he could crawl up under the porch and then squeeze behind the steps of the porch. Even if they looked under the porch, they could not see him behind the steps. He knew his sister would never find him. As she ran through the house, out of the house, in the weeds, in the trees, down to the corncrib, and in the barn, Fred kept smiling to himself, smug in the knowledge that she would never find him. "She'll never find me here. She'll never find me here," he sang to himself. Finally the truth of that statement occurred to him: *She'll never find me here!!!* So after awhile, he stuck out his toe. And when she ran by, she saw the toe and found

the rest of Fred attached to it.

As Fred looks back on that childhood experience, he asks: "Now, what did I want? What did I really want? My answer is the same as yours: I wanted to be found!"

When we consider our long lists of sin, isn't our answer the same as well? We want to be found. We want to make it to home base. We want to experience grace and forgiveness and reunion, who find their meaning only if we acknowledge first that we are chief among sinners and in need of grace.

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first that we are chief among sinners and in need of grace. For after all, why did Jesus Christ come?

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So perhaps you are willing to be found...do I dare say it...as a sinner this day. If so, we would welcome any public decisions of faith and would encourage other decisions of faith that will bring redemptive change into your lives. I will be here at the front to receive anyone who comes with a public decision as we stand and sing our hymn of commitment, #185, "Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners."