

Sermon Notes – March 4, 2018
“Is Sin Still Relevant”
Brian Walton

The word “sin” is definitely a “churchy” word. It is found 297 times in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) and 121 times in the New Testament. Ideas about sin have filled countless theological books and doctrinal statements since the beginning of Christianity. Even the United Church’s founding document known as the Basis of Union has a section on sin. In 1925 our ancestors wrote (show Basis of Union quote) :

We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil and so fell away from God and came under the penalty of sin which is eternal death and that by reason of this disobedience all men (sic) are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God’s law, and that no man (sic) can be saved but by His (sic) grace.

(Move to black slide) For centuries accusations about ‘sin,’ being named a ‘sinner’ and obsession about one’s own sinfulness have plagued humanity and burdened many a person. We all remember the scripture passage about the woman caught in adultery and the unruly crowd ready to stone her. I sometimes wonder if Christianity’s focus on sin has contributed to the modern exodus from the church. A poll which surveyed public attitudes to the United Church indicated the public’s appreciation for our sense of welcome, our social values, and our support of marginalized persons. When those same interviewees were asked if they would be interested in attending the United Church they were quick to decline. Asked why, they responded: “because church is where they tell you what to do and what not to do.” Contemporary culture, informed as it is by rampant individualism, has no interest in being told what, or what not, to do.

In 1973 the renown psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled, “*Whatever became of sin?*” Menninger explained that the social sciences did not like words such as ‘sin’ or ‘evil’ and that human shortcomings were better described with psychological terms or viewed through a sociological lens. For example, crime was no longer viewed as a moral failure but the consequence of a troubled mind or more likely, the product of

having been raised in negative social conditions such as poverty or abuse. This understanding of human failure encouraged us to deal with people differently. Criminals were to be treated and rehabilitated, not punished for their sins.

Menninger; however; despite being a 'cutting-edge' psychiatrist, believed that abandoning the idea of sin, and its corollary of moral accountability, hindered people from taking *some* responsibility for the dilemmas in which they found themselves. Menninger believed that being informed by a moral code was good for our 'health' and that not all behavior can be explained through biology or social circumstance. While 'lust' can be explained as a biological urge that encourages us to propagate our species, unrestrained lust can ultimately damage people and end relationships. Lust has moral consequences. Last week we pondered whether it was right to threaten, and perhaps injure another in order to protect our 'stuff'. There were those in the culture who argued against the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." Yet, tragically, we saw that coveting our possessions has moral consequences.

I agree with Menninger that we lose something when we simply do away with the concept of sin. I am grateful for the insights of psychology the other disciplines which help us understand the forces that influence human wrong-doing and provide insight about how to help humans live more creatively with one another. Yet, I believe in a kind of "original sin," a seemingly irrepressible force in the human creature that causes us to turn away from God's fundamental command to love one another.

In the statement I quoted earlier, our United Church ancestors attempted to explain our predicament. Let us read it again **(move to Basis of Union slide)** :

We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil and so fell away from God and came under the penalty of sin which is eternal death and that by reason of this disobedience all men (sic) are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law, and that no man (sic) can be saved but by His (sic) grace.

Every minister ordained in the United Church of Canada has to declare essential agreement with this statement – most of us can do so only by drastically re-interpreting these words. What follows is what I affirm and do not affirm about this statement.

- I do not believe that Adam and Eve are our first parents or are even real people – I do believe that an ancient Bible writer developed these characters to try and describe something about human life
- I do not believe that in the story they knowingly chose evil – it is not evil to talk to a serpent, it is not evil to be naked, likely was not evil to eat of the forbidden fruit. I do believe Adam and Eve revealed the essential nature of sin by putting themselves first, ahead of God’s request for harmony in the garden. It is this intention to always put ourselves first that is the sin that still plagues us.
- I do not believe that death is the punishment for sin; rather I believe, as with all creatures, we die because we are finite. I do believe that the act of putting oneself first does threaten life as we know it, both human and non-human.
- I do not believe that we can save ourselves from this sin, but must turn to God for help - but that is the story for next week.

In conclusion, I believe that all humans sin when sin is defined as “the relentless promotion of the self to the exclusion of others.” (display slide with foregoing statement)

Let me conclude with a realization I had about my own life. (move to black slide)
 Over my years of teaching at St. Paul’s Hospital I encountered some very conservative Roman Catholic seminarians. They were impassioned to speak about abortion as a mortal sin. Although I do not support abortion as a means of birth control, I believe very much in a woman’s right to choose. In response to these seminarians, I came to a realization. I shared with them that I end the life of children. I have thousands of dollars saved up for the day when I retire. I do not need the money today, yet there are many children who will die today for lack of food. I do not give my money to save a life, rather I keep it as part of my “some-day” fund. While many of you will think of me as prudent, and I do not intend to change my practice – I have come to realize that this decision reflects “the relentless promotion of myself to the exclusion of others.”

Perhaps the difference between the two versions of commandments in this morning's scripture is that Jesus recognizes the challenge of radical love. It is not enough that we keep the commandments, it is what is in our heart that matters. So it is that God keeps calling to me, in the midst of my very human life, to imagine a new way. In this way, God remains the hope of the world, as God holds up for us the possibility of a new way of being. To this we will turn next week.

As always, I look forward to your responses in person, by email or on the blog. In addition, we will have a chance to further discuss this topic in the Spiritual Conversations Groups this week and you are welcome to attend. And so, I leave it with you this morning – does the concept of sin have any relevance for your life?