

“No Distinction”
Romans 3:22b-26
4th Sunday in Lent

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Westminster, Greenville
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I wonder if any of you have ever heard of a churchman from the 17th century named Lancelot Andrewes.

No reason you ought to know who that is, but how many of you have ever read from the King James Bible? And how many of you have ever felt a deep sense of appreciation for the poetry and the beauty of those 400-year-old words?

If you have, then you owe a debt to Lancelot Andrewes. Lancelot Andrewes was “the chief and guiding Translator of the King James Bible.”

He was, by one account, “the most brilliant man in the English Church.”

Living in the 1600s, he could speak 15 modern languages, and six ancient ones.

But you know what Lancelot Andrewes did every single day? He prayed. Not for 5 minutes, but for 5 hours. He prayed for the miserableness of his soul.

“For me, O Lord,
sinning and not repenting,
and so utterly unworthy,
it were more becoming to lie prostrate before Thee
and with weeping and groaning to ask pardon for my sins,
than with polluted mouth to praise Thee.”¹

¹ Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

That's Lancelot Andrewes.

Think about that.

This was a brilliant man.

And he spent five hours every day, in prayer, because he was so consumed with the knowledge and awareness and guilt of his SIN.

Our sermon series for the season of Lent is "Back to the Basics." We're exploring different theological topics from a Presbyterian or Reformed perspective, and our topic for today...is SIN.

Every Sunday, you and I confess our sin together.

Every Sunday, we proclaim the forgiveness of our sin together.

But I wonder if we're ALL TOGETHER...when it comes to what we mean by sin.

As Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., the former President of Calvin Theological Seminary, once wrote: "The awareness of sin used to be our shadow. Christians hated sin, feared it, fled from it, grieved over it...But the shadow has dimmed..."²

One of my current-day faith heroes is Father Gregory Boyle.

He is an internationally known speaker.

His work with gang members in Los Angeles knows no peer.

He's written 3 books now, and when he writes about God in his books, Father Boyle doesn't focus much on sin and judgment. He describes a God who approaches us with tenderness and sorrow and healing and joy...³

² Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995.

³ The three books referred to here are *Tattoos on the Heart*, *Barking to the Choir*, and *The Whole Language*.

And that image of God works!
 So many people's lives have been changed because that image of God works.

All of which makes me wonder if I should even be preaching a sermon about sin.

Our topic this morning is sin, but let me fine-tune the question:
What kind of sin do we believe in?

I don't mean kind of sin, like in the Catholic Church there are mortal sins, and venial sins, a hierarchy of sins...

I mean:

What's the nature of sin?

How do we name it?

How do we recognize it?

Biblical Hebrew uses three different words to describe sin:

- The first has the sense of going astray, or getting distracted...
- Another has the sense of intentional violation...
- And yet a third carries a sense of rebellion.⁴

Our Presbyterian Book of Order says that one of the great themes of the Reformed tradition is our human tendency toward idolatry...it's why we confess our sin together in church every Sunday. And yet even that doesn't mean we're all of one mind when it comes to our sin.

For example, if I say that greed is a sin, how many of you would agree?

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2000.

Now, no need to raise your hand...but if I say that greed is not just a problem for the Gordon Geckos of the world, but because by definition we live in a society that teaches us to think of ourselves as consumers instead of children of God, greed is a sin for every person in this room...how many of you would agree?

Or if I say that racism still exists in our society, and that's a sin, I suspect I would get nearly unanimous agreement on that statement. But if I say that I believe there is still systemic racism in our society, that it's not just found in a few individuals but that's part and parcel of the way that many institutions still operate...I suspect there would NOT be universal agreement on that statement.

In our text from Romans this morning, Paul writes:

“For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”

When he wrote those words, the Apostle Paul did not mean that everyone has made at least one self-centered, idolatrous decision at some time in their lives.

For Paul, sin was a FORCE, a power, a separate entity that exists in our lives and infects God's world. We didn't hear this part of the letter, but you may recall later in Romans when Paul writes the following:

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

The first thing Presbyterians believe about sin is that we are, more often than not, BLIND to it. Like Paul describes, it captures us in ways we cannot see ahead of time.

Do you remember the movie, “Spotlight,” which won the Oscar back in 2015?

Michael Keaton plays Robby Robinson, who’s leading The Boston Globe’s team of reporters in its investigation of the coverup of decades of abuse by Catholic priests.

At the end of the movie, as the team is getting ready to go to print with their story, Robby admits to the team that its not just the leadership in the Catholic Church that knew something wrong was going on years ago.

The Globe knew.

He knew.

He had been sent a list of 20 priests who had engaged in abuse, a list that came to him from a lawyer back in 1993—almost 10 years before—and he had failed to follow up.

In other words, Robby Robinson did not do the good he wanted, but the evil he did not want is what he did. It’s sin as a force, sin like a virus, sin as something that gets into us when we’re not looking and we fail to recognize it...

Which leads to the second thing that Presbyterians believe about sin: it’s not just something that affects us as individuals. It affects the communities to which we belong.

Communal sin, institutional sin is not a modern idea.

It’s a biblical idea.

The prophets of old were all over this.

They weren’t just trying to weed out a few bad apples.

They addressed the people of Israel as a community.
They addressed nations as a whole.

Just read the opening chapter of Isaiah:

“Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil...who have forsaken the LORD...Why do you continue to rebel?

The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint.”

Now...those words were written over 2700 years ago about a people long ago and far away. Why would we think about sin in the same way today?

Because it's very easy for communities to encourage behavior and condone behavior and normalize behavior that, in the end, is sinful behavior.

For example, the high school from which I graduated in 1989 recently changed its mascot.

I graduated from J.W. Sexton High School in Lansing, Michigan. Our mascot, when I was there, was the face of a Native American elder or warrior or chief.

During the time that I was there it was changed from a mean-looking face to a smiling face.

But the mascot name did not change.

We were the Sexton Big Reds.

Now...I think about that today, and I think, how in the world?

But when I was there, I didn't think twice about it.

If we won a football game, the crowd was known to chant something like, “Shoulda been a Big Red!”

I participated, and I had fun.

And it never dawned on me that our school’s mascot was offensive, a caricature, hurtful to people with Native American heritage in our school and our community, and harmful in how it shaped any high schooler’s understanding of our country’s history.

Like I said, the school finally changed the name, some 30+ years after I graduated...and I’m glad that they finally did it.

It’s a public school, so the school would never say it this way, but I can say it this way: the name that was attached to our school in previous years, and its mascot...all that was a SIN.

It wasn’t a sin of one or two individuals.
It was a sin of the entire community.

So...what kind of sin do we, as Presbyterians, believe in?

1. Not just the kind that we can see in other people, but the kind that we’re blind to in ourselves...
2. Not just the kind that shows up in individual decisions, but the kind that shows up in communal decisions, within the institutions we create...

But let me pause for a second.

I realize that 7 pages into a sermon on sin...it can all feel like something of a downer on a Sunday morning, right? After all, which one of you came to church today thinking to yourself:

“I really hope Ben tells us we’re a bunch of no-good sinners today!”

So why spend 20 minutes talking about sin on a Sunday morning?

As Dr. Plantinga writes:

“...when we lack an ear for wrong notes in our lives, we cannot play right ones or even recognize them in the performance of others...

“without full disclosure on sin,
the gospel of grace becomes...uninteresting....
[and] unnecessary...”⁵

Why do we have a prayer of confession in our bulletin every Sunday? Not because we believe in a God of fire and brimstone, but because we believe in a God whose grace is sovereign and surprising. You see, Presbyterians believe that when we look squarely at our sin, in a strange paradox, God’s grace brings two gifts:

The first is humility.

Do you remember the late Vaclav Havel?

Havel was the former President of the Czech Republic, someone who resisted the Communists and was imprisoned for his activities.

“When he came to power after the Velvet Revolution, Havel was conspicuously forgiving toward his former enemies and other collaborators.”

While some criticized him for this, he held firm.

⁵ Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*.

About the Central European regimes in the 1970s and 80s, Havel remarked:

“The line [between good and evil] did not run clearly between ‘them’ and ‘us,’ but through each person.”⁶

Or as Paul put it in our text for today...there is no distinction.

So talking about our sin can lead to humility.

And it can also lead to hope.

In her searing memoir, *Becoming Ms. Burton*, Sue Burton tells about a difficult childhood, growing up under the shadow of abuse and poverty in Los Angeles. When her five-year-old son died after being hit by a police car, she turned to drinking and drugs to numb the pain.

She made poor decisions.

She went in and out of prison time and time again.

After her sixth time being released from prison, she found a treatment program in Santa Monica.

“I had doom all over me,” she writes.

Soon after entering the program, she attended her first AA meeting.

“...no one seemed to judge my piteous condition. The immediate compassion, the empathy, the love that rolled off these strangers was

⁶ The section on Havel quotes and summarizes from Fleming Rutledge’s sermon, “The Line Between Good and Evil,” in her book, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007.

enough to put a sizable dent in my pain, my shame, my guilt, and all that sorrow.

“In that room, I found hope.”

She also found more than that.

Before long, Sue Burton found a minimum-wage job, saved \$13,000, and bought a house.

Not just for herself.

But for other women like her.

And Sue Burton would go to the bus station where women would walk off the bus, recently released from prison, and she would offer them a clean and sober place to get their lives back on track.

She called it A New Way of Life.

That was back in 1998.

Fast forward 25 years...

A New Way of Life has turned into five transitional houses in L.A., with 12-step programs and free legal services. Sue Burton has helped more than 1,000 formerly incarcerated women. She's received numerous awards for her work through the years.

Perhaps one of the best moments came well before she started receiving awards.

Immediately after Sue Burton was released from the treatment program, she needed a place to stay. So she called her grown daughter, who had been through the ringer with her mother, and was skeptical of letting her mom stay with her.

But Sue Burton's daughter had a daughter.

And Sue Burton's granddaughter said to her mother:
 "We can't say no. Grandma's a different person now."

And her granddaughter said to her, "Grandma, I know you did
 some bad things, but you're not a bad person."

"Her words," Sue Burton writes, "...meant everything."⁷

I have no idea what Sue Burton's granddaughter's faith is...but she
 would make an excellent Presbyterian!

Sin might blind us and capture us, but it can never define us.
 It can never take away our baptismal identities as children of God.

**That's the third thing we believe about sin.
 It does not DEFINE our lives...only God's grace can do that.**

So let me invite you right now to consider something that you still
 feel guilty about...some mess you've made at some time in your life,
 words you spoke or something you did or failed to do...and you still
 carry this guilt around with you.

I hope you heard the words we said together earlier in worship, but
 in case your mind was elsewhere...six little words, very important:

"In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

Say those words again with me right now:

"In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven."

⁷ Susan Burton and Cari Lynn, *Becoming Ms. Burton: From Prison to Recovery to Leading the Fight for Incarcerated Women*, New York: The New Press, 2019.

I know.

You just love it when I make you join me by participating in the sermon.

Do it one more time:

“In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.”

That’s what Presbyterians believe about sin.

It’s the kind that’s been taken care of by Jesus Christ.

The guilt you carry? Set it down.

You can leave behind when you walk out these doors today...

Amen.