

## SIN -- MISSING THE MARK

(10/16/11)

Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:31-34  
Romans 5:12-21  
Luke 7:36-50

*"The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." (Jer. 31:31,33)*

There is a story about former President Calvin Coolidge, an introverted, perhaps even uncommunicative person, who was referred to by the nickname, "Silent Cal."

One Sunday morning Silent Cal arose and, after announcing his intentions to his wife, left the White House and took off by himself to church. (That was in the old days, when presidents could leave the White House and take a walk by themselves.) Upon returning he settled down in his easy chair and stared off into space.

Finally his wife, who found his silence annoying, broke into his reverie by asking him how church was. Cal replied it was all right. Determined to make a little conversation, as wives often do, she asked him what the minister had preached on. Cal replied, "Sin." After a brief wait to see if more information were forthcoming, she broke the silence once again, asking him what the minister had said about sin. Silent Cal looked up at her with an expression of mild annoyance and said, "He was against it."

We all know the concept of sin is an important part of our Christian beliefs. I've heard parishioners complain that we place an excessive focus on personal and social sin in church. They say, "I don't want to go to church and constantly be told what I'm doing wrong. I don't want a personal or social guilt trip laid on my head every Sunday."

In one sense, I agree with this viewpoint. We don't need to be beat over the head with constant reminders of our shortcomings. Psychologists and educators tell us that a constant focus on mistakes isn't the most effective way to produce attitudinal or behavioral change. On the other hand, as individuals, as a church, as a nation, and as a world, we could stand to hear a good deal more of the prophetic word of God as it calls us to task for who we are, for what we are doing and what we are not doing with this life and this planet which have been entrusted to us.

We commonly think of sin as things we have done wrong, as violations of the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule. The biblical concept of sin is more powerful, more meaningful than this. Sin, to be sure, is the breaking of God's moral code, the guidelines that God has given us to shape the living of our life, but it is also more than this. Our Christian faith is concerned with helping us understand what it means to live a moral life and with giving us the resources to live it, but it is also more than this.

The Greek word for sin that appears in most of the New Testament passages including our scripture lessons this morning, is '*amartea*. '*Amartea* doesn't mean doing something wrong. It should be translated as "missing the mark". It indicates that we are going astray, that we are not being a true witness, a true incarnation of what lies within.

This past week, as I was reading about Yom Kippur, which was observed a little over a week ago, I discovered, much to my surprise, that the Hebrew word for sin has the same meaning as the Greek '*amartea*. The word for sin in Hebrew is *chet*, an archery term that literally means "missing the mark".

According to the teachings of Judaism, sinning means going astray, not following through, or losing focus. Lack of honesty or integrity is sinful, as is ignoring or contradicting the Jewish laws. But an unconscious or accidental omission or slight can also be considered sinful. Sin isn't just what you do; it can also be what you don't do. For example, walking by someone in need can be considered a sin because of the missed opportunity to do a good deed.

According to the Jewish faith, there are three ways of sinning. We can sin against God, e.g., by making a vow that we don't keep or by violating ritual law. We can sin against another person, e.g., by acting illegally, hurtfully, or deceitfully. And we can sin against ourselves, e.g., by hiding behind addictive behavior or bringing harm to our body or mind. While Yom Kippur stresses the sins against God, the High Holidays as a whole encourage people to focus on all three types of sin, providing an opportunity to actively seek *and extend* forgiveness, and freeing people to act with greater integrity and truthfulness in the New Year.

You might note that we witness to the same basic truth in our prayer of confession every communion Sunday when I invite us to confess our separation or

alienation from our truest selves, from our brothers and sisters, and from that God who is the source of all life.

The essence of sin, then in both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures, is that we miss the mark. A mark is a goal, an objective at which we aim. We are like an arrow aimed at a target, a soul aimed by God at a mark, the mark of living a full, rich, beautiful, meaningful, human life, a life lived close to God. The mark is to be oneself fully as a child of God. Missing the mark means either going off in the wrong direction, or falling short of the goal. When we miss the mark, we live our lives in the “wasteland” of which T. S. Eliot so eloquently and powerfully spoke.

The doctrine of original sin, as I understand it, means that in addition to the image of God that is implanted within our soul, we also have an inborn possibility, an inborn potential, an inborn propensity to miss the mark. We can witness to this inner truth (Greek: *martea*) by being transparent to God. We also can live false, inauthentic lives (*a-martea*). We have the possibility, potential, and propensity to sin because we're human beings, and because we have the freedom of choice.

A few weeks ago during the Sacrament of Infant Baptism, I noted that baptism is not a magic ceremony. It doesn't wipe away this propensity to miss the mark. People who are baptized don't necessarily come closer to the mark than people who aren't. In infant baptism we place the child within a community of faith that will orient the child, that will point the child in the right direction, and that will turn the child's face toward God. Baptism is also a sign of the new covenant between God and us that was mentioned by Jeremiah and which was articulated more fully by Jesus: the grace of God that forgives and guides us back as many times as we miss the mark, the love that picks us up and urges us on as many times as we fall short.

Human beings have an inborn potential that is meant to unfold, a potential that is beautiful beyond our experience. But we humans also have the power to mess this up because we have free will. This makes it more meaningful when our lives turn out well; it makes it more tragic when they don't. This is a central dimension of the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This is why humans have original sin and animals don't. Original sin is that which confuses our choices, our values, our priorities,

and causes us to miss the mark. It may be nothing more than the egocentrism that inevitably attends the emergence of ego consciousness.

People sometimes raise the interesting question, "What if Adam and Eve didn't disobey God in the garden? What if they didn't eat the forbidden fruit, the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Would we still be living in paradise?"

The answer to this question, taking into account my belief that the story is a mythological story and not a literal historical account, is yes, but it would be paradise in the sense that a chimpanzee or a fish or an acorn lives in paradise. We would be close to nature and to God. We would only be what we were meant to be, because we would not have free will. There are few chimpanzees that try to be birds, and there are very few immoral fish or acorns.

The question is analogous to the philosophical maxim, "Would you rather be a happy pig or an unhappy Socrates searching for the meaning of life?" Stated somewhat differently, would you rather be a happy chimpanzee or a sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy Christian on a journey, on a lifelong pilgrimage to find God, the meaning of life, and yourself? We should remember that in the Genesis myth, God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden well within reach. God also placed the serpent in the Garden to tempt Adam and Eve. Even though, in the story, God became angry when Adam and Eve ate the fruit and discovered the difference between right and wrong, deep down, God probably wanted it to come out that way.

The apostle Paul describes Jesus the Christ as the Second Adam. According to Paul, Adam and Jesus are the two pivotal figures in the biblical revelation of life in relation to God. If Adam and Eve enabled us to become human, then Christ enables us to become fully human. If God first saw the appearance of human life, of free will in human beings as a mistake (for he became angry at Adam and Eve), then in becoming human in Christ he hallowed the human life, making it special and holy. If death and loss of meaning became possible for us because Adam and Eve became human beings, because they attained a higher level of consciousness than the other creatures, then life and meaning and truth become possible in Jesus Christ.

Almost immediately after Adam and Eve become human, humans begin to miss the mark. Cain kills his brother, Abel, in a fit of jealous rage. In a short period of time, cities sink to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah. At first God thought the slate could be wiped clean by means of the flood, but he soon realizes this was a mistake and promises never to do it again. He then attempts to straighten us out by means of the Law but, as Paul points out, the Law just made us conscious of our sin. The Law, even the threat of eternal punishment, didn't have the power to stop us from sinning.

No matter how hard we human beings tried, we couldn't hit the mark. We couldn't live up to the letter of the Old Testament Law, and even those who built their lives around a strict observance of the Law still missed the mark. They missed the mark because original sin, the inborn potential to betray our deepest values, was also present. It was then that God discovered, or maybe we humans discovered, that the meaning of life is not to live a life regulated by an endless set of laws. The meaning of life is to live a life in close communion with God.

According to Paul, Christ came "to free us from the power of sin and death." If we are the arrows, then Jesus is the archer with the bow. If we are the archer and our life is the arrow, then Jesus is the archery teacher, the master. He retrieves the arrow when it goes astray and, without condemnation, he hands it back to us and offers us the chance to shoot again. From him we learn it is possible to hit the mark, not once and for all, but time and time again throughout our life. From him we learn the meaning of true forgiveness, because no matter how many times we've missed the mark, and most of us have been very far astray at times, with his guiding hand we can reorient our lives around our true center.

Life has been described as an endless series of mistakes, things we do or say, or don't do or don't say that are indications that we are off the mark. But remember: a violinist doesn't hit a perfect note and hold it. In playing the violin, you move your finger back and forth ever so slightly between a little high and a little low. You move constantly back and forth between two errors, but you do so in such a way that you spend at least a good deal of the time on the correct note.

The grace of God is more powerful than the pull of sin. It is as if there are two forces fighting to aim the arrow--one to make it fall true, the other to lead it astray. As Paul writes, encouragingly:

*When law came it was to multiply the opportunities of falling, but however great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater; and so, just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

So what is God's response to our sin, the new covenant that is offered to us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? I have a hunch that it is outlined in the following story.

In her book, *The Power of an Open Question*, Elizabeth Mattis-Namgyel writes on the difference between fixing and healing. Fixing is basically an attempt to return things to the way they were. To fix someone in pain is to take away the pain, to restore the state of being without pain for which the person longs. Healing is different. It does not seek to move backward in time but forward. It involves an acceptance of life, an affirmation of life even with the pain and struggle that are an inevitable and integral part of our spiritual journey.

In her book the author shares an interview she heard on National Public Radio with a woman whose daughter was a heroin addict. The daughter was living on the street. The mother shared how much, how desperately she had tried to "fix" her daughter. She tried both rewards and punishments. She gave her daughter more lectures than she could recall. She dragged her daughter to rehab time and time again. She even tried "tough love," telling her daughter that until she kicked the heroin addiction, the mother would have no contact with her. Predictably, nothing worked.

Elizabeth Mattis-Hamgyel relates that finally this courageous mother came to accept her daughter's situation. Rather than trying to rehabilitate or change her, she just went and sat with her on a bench in the park – she started to bear witness to the truth of her daughter's predicament. In one way, the mother's story as she told it remained unresolved. She was unable to fix her daughter. However, she found the strength and the wisdom to be with her daughter in a healing way, in a way that may have even been healing for both of them.

Elizabeth Mattis-Hamgyel concludes this section with a question: “What did it take for that mother to sit by her daughter day after day without trying to change her?” I think this is a profound question. The mother offered her daughter empathy. She offered her daughter love. She offered her daughter presence, that presence that assured the daughter that should she ever feel a flicker of the tremendous courage she would need to break this terrible addiction, her mother would be at her side, walking with her out of the dark and into the light.

Maybe this is what God offers us in the new covenant. Maybe God is not judging us, scolding us, punishing us, or trying to fix us. Maybe God isn’t a fan of “tough love.” Maybe what God offers us is the kind of presence that that mother offered to her daughter. Maybe God just wants to sit down next to us on the bench in the park. That may be the most precious gift of all. With regard to the daughter, the mother’s gift of presence may very well be the response that is most likely to help the daughter break out of the dark that has engulfed her and to get her life back on track.

In worship, and especially in this stewardship season, we seek to open ourselves to the guiding hand of God. We ask God to help us envision who we are meant to be both as individuals and as a church. As an important part of this spiritual discipline, we need to reflect upon our sin -- not simply our sin as the things we may have done wrong, but rather our sin in not being the persons we should be. Let us reflect upon the ways we are missing the mark in our lives -- as persons, as husbands or wives, as parents, as friends, as Christians, and as a Christian church.

Then let us not only ask God for help, let us open ourselves to the reality of God’s loving, caring, compassionate presence on the park bench next to us as we seek to reorder our lives, to become better stewards of the life and the church that God has entrusted to us.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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