

I'm sure you've been sitting on pins and needles waiting for me to get back to the Lenten questions that I said that I would address when I last preached two weeks ago. Do you remember the Lenten questions that I posed two weeks ago? Well, never mind. That's OK if you do not. You'll be pleased to know that I DO remember.

After a brief hiatus last week because of our youth service, we are now back to our Lenten discussion of ....sin and repentance. Two weeks ago I left you with two questions: What is sin, and where does it come from. Today we'll deal with question number one. What is sin? Many have tackled this question as you might imagine. The classic answers are: It is a breaking of God's laws, which are our laws. It is the seven deadly sins of pride, anger, envy, greed, lust, jealousy, and sloth. M. Scott Peck in his famous book *The Road less Travelled* says that sin all comes down to laziness. He later says that that notion is probably too simplistic, but it is in the main true. Perhaps a more general answer but one that has a great deal of truth is that sin is a state that separates us from our neighbors and loved ones and from God. It isn't just me with sin on the brain – our epistle and gospel readings address it too! Both Paul and Jesus have warnings for us this morning about sin. But these are difficult texts. There's no point in avoiding the subject. So let's dive in.

First let's look at the lesson Lynn read for us from Paul. If we take a little time to understand what was going on in Corinth at the time when Paul wrote his letter, to understand what Paul was talking about and how it might just possibly relate to us.

It's funny to think about it this way, but when we read Paul's letters we are reading someone else's mail. But in this case that's not a sin! We are over hearing a conversation that wasn't meant to pertain to us. I'm sure that when Paul wrote his letter that he never realized that we would be reading, re-reading and analyzing his letters 2000 years later. He was just writing to the people where he had set up a church, and he was trying to solve their problems from a

distance. As Richard Hays says about this letter *“No doubt the Corinthian Christians of Paul’s day would have preferred that this correspondence not be broadcast to the ages, for it portrays them in an unflattering light and divulges a number of things that they might well, with the wisdom of hindsight, wish to have kept private.”* But we are lucky that it was not kept private because our faith is illuminated by the wisdom of Paul in many parts of this letter. *“Love is patient. Love is kind.”* And *“Now we see in a mirror dimly. But then we will see face to face.”* Both of these are from Chapter 13. We would be lacking a great deal without Paul’s words to the Corinthians.

So, it will help us understand what Paul is saying if we look at the context in which the letter was written. Here’s the back story about Corinth. Corinth was/is located on a large isthmus between the Aegean and Ionian seas; the Peloponnesian Peninsula in modern day Greece. It was safer in those days to ship goods overland through Corinth when traders were transporting goods between Asia and Italy. Corinth was a lively Greek city with a well established Greek culture, games that rivaled the Olympics in Athens, and so we are told, loose morals. But, in 146 BCE it was captured by the Romans and basically completely destroyed. It was re-founded as a Roman colony in 44 BCE and the makeup of the population changed a great deal at that time with an influx of Romans, Greeks and freed slaves. Paul arrived less than 100 years later around 51 CE and he stayed with the Corinthians for about 18 months according to the Book of Acts.

Paul is trying to keep his band of Christians together despite the outside influences in their city. They have pagan friends who worship the Roman and Greek gods. They attend pagan festivals when food is sacrificed to idols, and then there is the sexual promiscuity. Paul had heard from Chloe’s people that there had been arguments among church members about the Lord’s Supper, people who had been sexually unfaithful to their partners, legal disputes and all sorts of altercations between members of the Christian community. I can’t imagine that sort of thing going on in a Christian Church these days, can you?

One very interesting thing to note is that because the society in Corinth had been reformed after the Roman conquest of the city, there were no longer fixed strata of money and power and freedom. There were many different socio-economic groups that were all members of this Christian church. In that way their church was much like ours today. There were rich, poor, freed slaves, and everything in between. All were seeking a better life. So those Corinthians maybe weren't so different from you and me.

So, now let's look at what Paul was trying to say to his people. Let's look at our bulletin and the Epistle reading. See how Paul makes a point in the beginning to say that ALL of the Israelites hung together in what they went through before, during and after the exodus. Paul also calls the Israelites OUR ANCESTORS. He wants Romans and Greeks alike to understand Moses as their spiritual ancestor if not literal ancestor. We are in the same boat. We are probably not descendents of Moses (although with the new DNA testing that's available I guess anything is possible). But we have been grafted onto the tree of the faith of the Israelites. Paul even goes so far as to bring in Christ as the rock from whom the Israelites drank when they were thirsty. Christ was always there, Paul is saying. With them....and with you. It's masterful really!

Then, having brought the people together with these ALL statements he then proceeds to tell them that they are on dangerous ground like SOME of the Israelites were. Let them serve as an example, Paul says. If you go astray, you'll get knocked down. That's his message. Don't play with fire, guys, or you are going to get burned. It seems as though the Corinthian Christians were getting a bit cocky about their ability to hang out with their old pagan friends and thought that they could avoid the temptations to excess that were associated with the pagan temples and festivals. They had not been heeding Paul's message that there were some people, places and things that need to be avoided if they were to continue to successfully walk their new path, for them, the Christian path. Think about your life are there situations which should be avoided to keep you safe from saying or doing things you don't really want to say or do?

Looking at your reading again, see how Paul then uses the phrase “some of them did” four times over. There were many temptations put in front of the Corinthians, and there are some of the same that are always right in our faces too. If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall! There are many things in the world that test us, and tempt us. Paul does not say that God struck them down. He just says that they were struck down. It’s not a matter of punishment, it’s a matter of consequences.

When Paul talks about God’s role, he says that God is faithful. It’s also important to note that Paul does not say that God tests us. It is the world that tests us, and God who stands ready to provide a way out. That way out is to acknowledge that we have done something wrong, and then to honestly and faithfully try to amend our lives. It was the same for the Corinthians as it is for us. Paul is not telling the Corinthians that they must be perfect, just that they shouldn’t act like children who are always testing the boundaries of what they can get away with.

He doesn’t expect them to be saints, but to just keep trying to grow along spiritual lines. And it’s important to remember as Rabbi Kushner says that *“life is not a spelling bee where, no matter how many words you spell right, when you get one word wrong you are out of the game. “Life is more like a baseball season, where even the best team loses some games, and even the worst team has its days of brilliance. Our goal is not to go all year without losing a game, our goal is to win more than we lose, and do our best.”* Well, I guess the Rabbi hasn’t met the 16 and 0 UCONN women’s Basketball team. Our record may be more along the lines of the **men’s** UCONN team this year. But that’s OK. Even #1 ranked Syracuse is 15 and 2!

Our Gospel reading from Luke is not so easy to understand either. Some people have come to Jesus to ask him about the nature of evil. They tell him about two different circumstances. In one case Pilate killed some Jewish men from Galilee who were sacrificing going through their religious rituals at the Temple.

The people want to know if they had sinned in some way and that is why they ended up being victims of murder. Then they ask Jesus about another tragedy. A tower fell accidentally and

killed some people. They ask Jesus if those people died because they had sinned. Does God punish us when we do something wrong, they ask.

Jesus' answer is – NO. God does not punish people. It is true that sometimes there are consequences to our actions, and sometimes bad things just happen. Surely the people of Jesus' day had seen that sometimes the worst sinner gets off scot free and sometimes the most innocent person seems to suffer for no reason. The Book of Job remember, makes that same point. We WANT order to the chaos! God does not punish us, and God does not test or tempt us. Sometimes accidents happen. And sometimes people suffer because of the sins of others.

Jesus says though that all people must repent or they will perish. Why then does he say this? He says this because living with your sins, is not living at all. It is a type of perishing. When we behave badly, when we hurt other people either by our words or our deeds, we hurt ourselves and our relationships. We cannot live well like that. That is why Jesus says "You will perish unless you repent." There comes a time in one's life, and now, in Lent, is as good a time as any, to take stock of what we've done and left undone, and make a decision to turn our lives around, repent and then start over.

Jesus answers the people who come to question him by telling them to repent, but then also by telling them a parable. Sometimes it is a challenge just to figure out why Jesus tells a story, and how that relates to his subject. In this case he is telling a story about a commonplace tree that all would have been quite familiar with in his time. The normal thing to do is cut down an imperfect tree that bears no fruit. That would be like the spelling bee that Rabbi Kushner mentions. No fruit, a word spelled wrong and you're outta here. But the Gardener, who is God, wants to be patient with the tree. Give it a chance he tells the man. Let me work with it for a while. That is how God is with us. We sometimes need another chance too. Jesus came to tell us good news. God is patient, more patient than we are, or sometimes our families and friends are. God is understanding and knows we need care. Jesus tells us that God does not drop buildings on us, or send murderers to us as a punishment. And life is not like a spelling

bee. God will wait patiently for us to figure it out – realize that all of us constantly need to decide to turn our lives around again, and live.

SOURCES:

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