

Six Words: Sin
Lent Sermon Series
Genesis 3
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We begin our Lenten sermon series, “Six Faith Words That Aren’t So Bad.” In crafting this series, Todd and I identified six terms that we know are *loaded*, that carry great significance in the Christian tradition AND that carry social, emotional, and theological baggage for many of us.

For each word, our task is to consider, as individuals and as a church, what meanings of word we might want to hold on to, and what meanings we might want to let go of. What about the word is life-giving, and what isn’t? What about the word challenges us in a healthy way, and what undermines us, or shuts us down? This is a fitting task for Lent, that season when we go deeper into our faith.

I’m excited to leap right in with “sin.” Sin is a word that we get from both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and the original Hebrew and Greek words mean something along the lines of “missing the mark.” Think spear-throwing or archery, when the projectile sails by the target. That’s sin: our deviating from God’s desires for us; our swerving away from God’s divine commandments.

Now, sin is word a concept that the progressive church often holds at arm’s length. We do that for good reason. We’re all too familiar with how churches use sin *abusively*, to marginalize and shame and exclude and control. We’re also all too familiar with how churches use sin *anachronistically*, that is, when churches use definitions of sin from ancient times and cultures and try to apply them today.

As part of my research for this sermon I did what anyone would do—I googled “all the sins in the Bible”—and all these conservative and fundamentalist sites came up. They listed in painstaking detail *every single* prohibition in Hebrew Bible and New Testament, hundreds and hundreds of them, from drunkenness to foolishness to murder to praying too long to—my favorite—“preaching with vain babblings.” I will try my best to avoid that one, but no guarantees.

I’ve heard so many stories—including stories of people right here in these pews—who grew up with a certain definition of sin and sinning that wounded them, deeply. And people have told me how important it has been for them to reject those traditions and doctrines and expectations. How liberating. How healing.

I really want to honor those experiences.

And I’d like to wonder, with you, if the concept of sin may hold deeper, richer meaning than its use as a cudgel; if it might actually help us think about ourselves and our world, especially in this moment we’re in.

When thinking about the meaning of sin, it makes sense to go back to the beginning, to the story that is known as The Fall, or the First Sin, or the Original Sin. According to Western culture, the Garden of Eden is ground zero for everything, and many of our most toxic ideas about sin come from this story.

For example, there is the inextricable association between women and sin. There is the connection between sexuality and sin. The connection between human bodies and sin, between curiosity and sin. Not to mention the pursuit of knowledge and sin. All from this from one ancient story.

It's hard to even fathom the damage caused by those associations. The fall of Adam and Eve has been used to control and oppress the bodies and minds of generations of people.

Fun fact, though: the word "sin" does not actually appear in the original text of Genesis 3. It appears later, many times, but we really have early church fathers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to thank for the prevailing interpretation of that story. They read that story and saw evidence of humanity's bondage to sin. Early Protestant Reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther loved this idea, and ran with it. They liked the phrase "total depravity." From their perspective, since they believed that Adam and Eve were the very first people on earth, human beings ever since had been genetically corrupted by Adam and Eve's transgressive actions in the Garden, always inclined toward evil. And only through the undeserved grace of God do we have any shot at redemption.

So we have these two visions of sin coming together: first, that sin is tangled up with the natural human experience of sexuality and embodiedness and exploration; and second, that sin is inevitable and brutal and dooms most of us, forever; and these two visions dovetail, over centuries, into this perfect formula for shame and cruelty and denial—denial of self, denial of pleasure, denial of the humanity of others.

It's a mess. And I see the fruits of this mess all over place. I see when I'm preparing to baptize a baby, and a parent asks, almost fearfully, if I believe that the beautiful infant in their arms is already a sinner in the eyes of God.

And I always answer no, I don't believe that, because what I hear the family asking is whether I believe--and by extension, whether the church believes--that their baby is *bad*. And the answer to that is always a resounding "no." I believe that God called creation good. And so the baby is good. And the parents are good. And of us are good.

But I do wonder if we lose something when avoid talking about sin and the human condition altogether. A clergy colleague of mine, the Rev. John Edgerton, wrote about this subject recently. He and his wife are expecting a baby, and he was reflecting on a verse from Psalm 51, which reads, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my parents conceived me.” This is the sort of biblical language that would send many of us running for the hills, but John reframes it.

He writes, “Thank God for the Psalms. They are too honest to depict children as if they were angels, heavenly visitors who are different and better than we who have been tainted by living too long in God’s creation. I believe it’s true, what the Psalm has to say of this child I’ve never met. I believe it’s true that the child is already sinful. Sinfulness, which is to be tied up with and implicated in the heartbreaks of the world.”

“Implicated in the heartbreaks of the world.” I love that. I love it because it gets at something I do believe to be true, which is that we are all broken to some degree or another. But here’s the thing, and this is crucial: we’re not broken because of our sexual behavior or our gender or our bodies, but because that’s the reality of the human condition.

Human beings make bad choices sometimes. Human beings act selfishly and impulsively sometimes. Human beings miss the mark sometimes, especially when we are scared or angry or think we’re under attack.

This is one area where I think theology and science come together quite beautifully. Neuroscience tells us that we have these things called amygdalas, little almond-shaped clumps of tissue that detect fear and trigger emergency responses within our bodies. Our amygdalas keep us safe and our responsible for our survival. And sometimes they go into overdrive and cause us to act out of fear even when no threat is present.

Perhaps that is our real original sin: acting out of fear and harming other people when God has told us, repeatedly, that we need not be afraid.

Personally, I want to be less afraid to name sin where I see it. Because it feels to me like it's everywhere, especially sin paired with power. Sin paired with power—the power of white privilege, class privilege, gender privilege, producing racism, misogyny, and corporate greed.

I think we can confidently name those things as sins because they get back to the root meaning of the word: these things are examples of missing the mark.

And the mark, in this case, is the great commandment that we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. These are sins committed not just by individuals. These are institutional sins, collective sins, sins that poison all of us, that distort all of us: the oppressed and the oppressor, the terrorist and the terrorized, the abuser and the abused.

I have a memory of being in kindergarten. I lived in a very white community, and there was one child of Asian descent in my classroom. One day during recess, I found myself in a clump of white children who began to tease this boy, insisting to him that he was Chinese. And I can still hear him saying, “No, I’m Vietnamese.” “No, we insisted, laughing, “Look at your eyes. You’re Chinese.”

And on some level, I knew that what we were doing was very wrong. I felt the wrongness of it in the pit of my stomach. But the better angel of my nature was overwhelmed by my own deep fear of being excluded.

When I look at that memory, I see sin. I see generations of sin, the sins of white supremacy and colonialism and segregation, all coalescing in that brief interaction between children.

It cannot be denied: I caused harm that day. I failed to love my neighbor. And I feel shame; not a paralyzing sort of shame that makes me feel like an irredeemable worm. But a shame that makes me want to change myself *and* the society that produced that moment. I want to resist the oppressive forces, both overt and subtle, that teach us to ostracize each other.

In a moment, we'll sing that beloved old hymn, "There is Balm in Gilead." We'll ask for healing of our sin-sick souls. I actually really love that phrase, "sin-sick." It captures what sin does to us. It makes us sick. It makes us less whole, and less holy, than God wants us to be.

So let's sing, not because we are bad or irredeemably depraved, but because we are human. To be human is to err. To be human is to cause harm sometimes.

Thankfully, though, that's not the end of the story. There's more to being human than that. To human is *also* to be good in the eyes of God. To be human is to be named beloved by God. And God loves us not in spite of our sinfulness, but *through* our sinfulness—through our fear and our trembling, through our selfishness and our greed. God sees who we are, and who we could be, and offers us the grace we need to heal.

May it be so. Amen.