

Sin (again)

In a way I feel bad for you because in two out of four weeks, the topic, driven by our Lectionary readings, is something we Episcopalians don't talk about that much.

Oh sure, bring up grace or justice or the gentleness of God, bring up the broad tent — let everyone in! — we're all over that.

But the one topic we tend to leave to others is the topic of sin.

So during the first Sunday of Lent we went back to the Garden of Eden, the Garden of Harmony, and there we discovered that the mystery of Original Sin, that bizarre yet ever present mystery underlying all human misery, well, we discovered that Capital "S" Sin begins when we decide to take in, to consume, to grab hold of with all our might, the knowledge of good and evil.

When we decide what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is evil, that's the great Fall of humanity.

That's our walking papers from the garden of harmony, because what we see and judge and determine to be good or evil is so clouded with our own biases, our own backgrounds, our own prides and prejudices, and our own rose colored glasses.

Such is the origin of sin, and we live it breath it and drink it each and every day — so maybe it's no surprise that here it is again, in a lengthy gospel lesson — in which we are all players, by design, (because we ARE all players in this drama of sin) — it's a story that begins with a question about sin and ends with an accusation of sin.

So, you and I together this morning, we are stuck.

If we hope to hear a word from the Lord today, and not a word from David, we've got to talk about sin, again.

It's a story that starts out a lot like the story in Genesis.

But instead of the Word of God creating the land and the sea, here, this morning, right in our very midst, the Word of God, Jesus, takes dirt and spit, kneads it, and creates, right before our eyes -- in a man born blind -- new eyes.

"Is he the sinner, or is it his parents?" the disciples just get finished asking before Jesus gets to work.

"No," Jesus replies, as if to say: "when it comes to God, forget about cause and effect, this man's blindness is here because creation is not yet finished, this man will show that God continues to create, even at this late date, new eyes and new ears and healed hearts and forgiving spirits, so forget about sin causing bad things to happen to people, bad things happen because creation is not yet finished, but it groans with eager expectation awaiting its completion."

This of course is way too much for the religious know-it-alls.

Think of them as the Diocesan Council or any gathering of clergy, really!

They know perfectly well what God is all about.

They know how God thinks, acts and what God expects.

And it is NOT this!

"We read the Bible and we know God rests on the Sabbath.

So, if you want to be cool with God, you better rest, and resting means no healing on the sabbath, no kneading of mud, or spit or anything else," they say.

But Jesus knows that kind of Sabbath separates people: it creates classes between the "good" folks who have the luxury of resting on that day, and the working stiffs who don't; it puts God in a box, limited by our definition of God, all based on what we say is good and evil.

But in Jesus, the sabbath is not simply a day of rest, it is a day that reflects the unfinished business of creation, because there is still hunger and shame and need and blindness and accusation and pain all intricately bound up in the good creation of God, and so the sabbath, for Jesus, is a sign that God is not finished with us yet — and that's the sign Jesus delivers today when he gives this unnamed man, who's asked for nothing, new eyes.

And that's when the trouble starts.

As Fred Nieder puts it:

"The Pharisees in the story, like the Pharisee in each of us, prove stubbornly blind to the reckless gift of mercy.

It is mercy poured out on the wrong day, to an unworthy recipient, from a maverick nobody whom the Pharisees can't stand.

Religion seems to be love struck with structure and limits, perhaps because in the face of mystery our first reaction is anxiety and a loss of control.

Jesus' reckless gifts of mercy, like seeds flung far and wide, like rain falling on the just and the unjust, like weeds and wheat growing together, all of this plays havoc with our need for order and decorum and decent behavior.

It goes against our subconscious certainty that in some way, we deserve what we get — and so do those beggars on the street who must have done something awful to get themselves into their pickle." Christian Century, (February 26, 2008) paraphrased.

This is how a fellow like Paul Ryan can say that the poor are poor because they themselves have developed a culture of poverty.

It's how in the 1980s we let AIDS patients die, because after all, they deserved their illness; how women who are raped are often accused of enticing the attack....it's the oldest story in the book: blame the victim!

And that's where we find ourselves when we pick up with the story.

Jesus leaves the scene.

The formerly blind man is alone.

And no sooner is his sight restored than people are all over him.

Not one of them is saying what does it feel like?, congratulations on your new eyesight!, what does the world look like to you?

None of those questions are asked, instead he's interrogated with the charge that he was never blind in the first place!

Those who know the difference between good and evil are certain he's a fraud, until they meet the parents, who, despite their own fear of being kicked out of the club, assure them that yes, in fact, he was born blind.

Having failed to expose him as a fraud, the people who know good from evil move to the next logical response: whoever did the healing must be using evil powers, and any one who decides to follow this evil healer is evil himself.

So they say to the formerly blind man, who at first timidly responds that while he don't know much, it stands to reason that the fellow who did this must be a prophet.

Then, when they keep after him, he gets a little braver, saying, I don't know if he's good or bad, all I know is I can see!

And when they persist, he gets braver still, and he throws their own wisdom right back in their laps:

God doesn't listen to sinners, remember? So how can a sinner make a blind man see?

They have no answer, except to brand him once again as a sinner, exercising the deadly skill of declaring what is good and what is evil, and, finding him to be evil, they throw him out.

Good riddance, good-bye, get lost!

And there we have in a nice little nutshell how human communities keep their cohesion, how human communities keep themselves together: we find a reject, a scapegoat, on him we pile our rage, our fears, our despair, and we kick him out, and in the kicking out, we feel good, we feel united, we feel saved.

We don't need to look far to see how true this is, whether it's going after Saddam Hussein to knit our country together after the 9/11 attacks, or Vladimir Putin uniting Russia by seizing Crimea or smaller communities isolating those who are different, those who don't fit in, and getting rid of them — expelling people is how those who know how to define good and evil keep their communities together.

But Jesus isn't like that.

He goes in search of the expelled man, just like the shepherd looks for the one lost sheep out of ninety-nine, just like the woman searches for the one lost coin, just as the father hikes up his pants and runs with joy toward the returning prodigal son, Jesus goes on the hunt for the now expelled formerly blind man, and Jesus, just like he finds you and me, Jesus finds him.

The man isn't recognizing Jesus' face because he was blind when Jesus first touched him, but now he hears the voice, the voice that is so familiar, a voice so many of you have heard, a voice that gently, quietly, yet persistently moves you this way or that.

Jesus asks him this strange question: "Do you believe in the son of man?"

And in his answer, the formerly blind man pushes even further the radical notion that sin is the ability to tell good from evil.

"Who is the Son of Man that I may believe in him," he asks.

Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he."

He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worships him.

Here's where it happens.

Here's where sin takes on even deeper depths.

In our insistence on defining what is good and what is evil, we fail to recognize our own innate brokenness, our own blindness, our own limited, stunted, miniaturized vision of the who and what and wherefore of God: which takes us to the very root of sin as St. John understands it: sin is our failure to see in Jesus the face and character and heart of the Living God, and our failure to give ourselves over to that truth.

The opposite of sin is NOT being a nice person who walks the straight and narrow.

Jesus didn't come to make us nice, he came to make us new.

The opposite of sin is faith in Jesus.

The opposite of sin is faith in Jesus: meaning, not that we walk around beating folks over the head with our limited, partial, inadequate views of who and what Jesus is; that's what gets the Pharisees in such hot water today: claiming to see so much more than they actually do, and thus remaining blind to God's actual work in the world.

No, that the opposite of sin is faith in Jesus may mean lining up our lives with this preacher from Galilee who welcomes the outcast, who remakes rules so the rules serve humanity, not humanity the rules, who loves a good time, a good laugh, and who is determined to save not just the few and deserving, but the whole wide world. and who does so, not with some magical wave of a wand, but by loving every single human person to death, to his death, a death on the cross.

It may mean signing on with this God who is even now hard at work, bringing creation to completion by mixing spit and mud, smearing it on our blind spots, on our hurts, on our fears, and using the most unlikely people: that gal at work who drives me crazy, that fellow over there who has it all wrong.

God uses the ordinary things of this world to bring about the rebirth of heaven on earth.

That the opposite of sin is faith in Jesus may mean coming to see God not as some far away grumpy old man and coming to believe in a God who is, even now, a wildly pregnant woman in the midst of agonizing but hopeful labor, a labor that is preparing to give birth to you and I as new human beings, and in some baffling but magnificent way, entreating all of us to join in the labor, to join in the mud and the spit and to proclaim the gospel sometimes with our words, but most often with our lives.

Which, in a strange sort of way, gets us back where we began: back to grace and justice and the gentleness of God, back to the broad tent — back to letting everyone who wants in — in!

It's the old story of Peter and Paul at heaven's gate, religiously keeping track of everyone coming into the kingdom of God; but their numbers never add up, always, there are more people coming in than they can account for.....because Jesus keeps hauling them in!

It's the story Billy Graham tells about being in a Chinese Buddhist monastery who, after talking for quite a while, asks a monk, who seems to be taking it all in,

"Are you willing to invite Jesus into your life right now?"

The monk looks at Graham with dismay, saying:

"Accept him into my life?"

But you must understand that he is already in my life. He has been in my life for a long time. I didn't know all the things you just told me about him, but this Jesus is within me and as you spoke his Spirit that is within me confirmed everything you said." Claiborne, Red Letter Revolution. pp 53-4.

Jesus comes to save the whole world, and because of that, it's not so much our belief in Jesus that saves us, it's that Jesus believes in us: and if we can, with open hearts and minds, have faith in that truth, and treat each other likewise, well, that's when eternal life pulls back the curtain just enough to open for us a path, not when we're dead and gone, but now, today, this moment — for by accepting our own blindness, we are given the gift of sight.

+amen

