

SIN SERIOUSLY

Texts on the First Sunday of Lent

February 21, 2010

Luke 4: 1-13

Temptation, to judge from the way the word is used, is pretty simple, if pretty bad. There are pleasures and treasures and powers that ought not be sought, goes the common sense ditty, and yet something in us desires those forbidden fruits. So, while from one shoulder conscience speaks No!, Desire from the other is tempting us with its Yes. Now, boys and girls, concludes conventional morality, it's a sin to give in, so keep away from temptation. Such simplistic summaries of our nature cloud our minds, and, alas, stuff the sermons and ears of millions of church-goers all Lent long. The main effect is to intensify a judgmental mind set and drive the anxious from the field of life up into the stands for spectators and accusers. Luther wrote somewhere, "Sin boldly!"—meaning not, of course, that you must try to do evil, and boldly, but rather that you should run on the field of life, trusting in one judge only to correct you. Let's think about sin seriously this Lent.

What is sin? A parishioner once asked me, *Can't we stop using this word?* He did not mean, Can't we "accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative?" No. This was a gay man and he was sick to death of feeling that pin "sin" stuck in him and in all gay people. He didn't imagine we could change the way the world handles its hatred and fear. He just wanted our sanctuary to be safe from that awful sound. This is poignant, but when it comes to acknowledging our sorest self-knowledge, the word *sin* is unique. What is sin?

Many of us were taught that a sin is a bad behavior, as named in a list, and some sins are worse than others. But who says? And whose list? If you bring your list, and you bring yours, soon we're all working for a cosmic Stasi, like that East German secret police which literally employed about a third of that population to spy on their fellow citizens. The great temptation of thinking of sin as a list is its suggestion that being good is just a matter of willing it. *See the bad (it's on the list)—and cut it out!* Just like what you yelled up to the kids when they fought too long. But if sin is just bad action you could control if you really wanted to, self-understanding is lost. Sin as a list makes sin a merely human affair—me, having to deal with your list; me, having to control me; me, angry at me, or at you, for failures. This is hell. Sin, understood well, is not about hell. It's about returning from hell to life.

Consider the story of Jesus with the devil in the wilderness. Now, we say almost without reflection that Jesus never sinned. That's the children's version. If it is supposed to mean that he never talked back to his mother or never spoke irritably to a friend, so never had to say *I'm sorry*, we are headed for confusion. That is the path of the perfectly punched list of sins, a fantasy about a man with a perfect will, incomparably different from ourselves. Think, rather, about the inside of the experience of temptation. Its draining, negative character is its unresolved two-ness—I want this, and I want that. Did you know that *doubt* and *double* are word-cousins? You can see it in doubt's funny spelling. You can feel it in the anxiety of double-mindedness, doubting that you can find well-being down either path if you don't go both. Split! The negativity in what we call temptation is not in the thing itself, nor in its enjoyment, much less in the forces which bring it to our awareness. The negativity is in ourself, in our indecision about what will make us happy. Temptation is about identity—or rather a lack of it. It is about feeling split off from our destiny, ignorant of where we are going. Here is where sin touches down. Not according to a list, but in the experience of being responsible for losing touch with our essential unity, our integrity. We dis-integrate. Duplicity replaces simplicity; double-mindedness instead of purity of heart.

It is in this sense that Jesus did not sin. His union with the Father—his integrity—was never broken in two-ness. In this sense, he was not in fact tempted by the devil. Tested, yes. ("Tested" is the word Luke and Matthew use, by the way.) He even discovers his destiny through the testing—in other words,

testing is not actually a bad process—but Jesus’ heart does not abandon confidence that all is well and will be, when he must live as one hungry, for stones will not be conjured into bread; as one with no power or wealth over the kingdoms of men; as one who must die, for no angel will bear him up from his cross.

Why are we so vulnerable to double-mindedness—to the grief of desiring incompatible outcomes? When I was twenty, I smoked cigarettes sometimes. Lacking the means for a regular habit, I had perhaps more than the ordinary enjoyment of each stick. One evening, I stood outside alone after dinner, smoking. I noticed that a subtle anxiety accompanied the pleasure. It was this. Soon, the smoke would be over and I would be obliged to re-enter the seconds, minutes, and hours of my life, my choices, my gifts, my uncertainties. The pleasure was to be out of it for a bit. I suddenly saw two things.

One, that for me, the desire to smoke had mostly to do with this need to suspend time, to enter a seven minute bubble of release from feeling my life as a question. And two, that the desire for sex with my girlfriend was not altogether different, except that she was a person, while this thing in my hand was just a cigarette. I was not then a Christian, and not for some years would I learn of the prayer for chastity Augustine had made when he was first drawn to Christ—*O, Lord, make me chaste, but not yet*—but as I stood and snuffed the last light from my little cigarette, my mind reeled with awareness of the peculiarly infinite hunger of my consciousness, aware of time and death, aware of desire and need, craving happiness constantly, willing sometimes to stuff almost anything or anyone into the hole of anxiety and doubt to quiet it for a time. Double-mindedness. Even though I hadn’t yet the name for it, this was discovering sin seriously.

I might not remember this story so well had I not begun to study the theology of Paul Tillich that very spring. What a marvel for insight, to read in Tillich’s discussion of sin:

“Every individual, since he is separated from the whole, desires reunion with the whole. His poverty makes him seek abundance . . . The classical name for this desire is *concupiscence*—the unlimited desire to draw the whole of reality into one’s self.” (Systematic Theology, Vol. 2, p. 52)

Since Tiger Woods has placed on the national table his struggle with, well, “unlimited desire to draw the whole of sexual reality into himself,” let us make good use of his seriousness. In his statement last Friday, he recalled his Buddhist training from his mother’s knee, which teaches that craving is the cause of all unhappiness. And he said that he had abandoned that path. Which is to say that the knowledge of the youth, in the head, had no sway against the fears in the adult. Craving crystallizes in the non-childish belief that we are separated from our happiness. Then we experience time as an enemy, sweeping us toward its oblivion. Then we are vulnerable. Then we will take anything, eat anything, to fill the hunger. Then it is as if life itself tempted us: *Command these stones to become bread. Command this body to bring you alive. Command this shopping center to deliver your self-esteem. Command this bottle to take you away from here.* It’s all one. The infinite pressure to take what is not given is the now-or-never fear of him and her who feels split from her ground, from his God, disintegrated, double-minded, doubting. But one does not live by bread alone, says the Lord.

So what is sin? Here we must leave Tiger Woods out of it, because sin refers to a person’s awareness that he has turned away from trust in God. Therefore, I can’t know whether Woods or another has sinned—unless he tells me so. Sin is always present-tense awareness of having broken trust in your destiny with God. And sin is that word by which the sinner re-connects with God. No other word than sin speaks of—no other even contemplates— that possibility. *Simul peccator, simul justus!* declared Luther. The act of acknowledging sin is the same act that receives God’s redeeming word. Now this is sin seriously. “Sin is not sin,” writes Kierkegaard, sounding like a Buddhist master. “No, sin is the repetition of sin.” In other words, error before God only gets really difficult when we have seen and felt our disintegration from God, and yet have again chosen more disintegration, more duplicity, more anxious uncertainty for our destiny. Of course, we have all walked down that lonesome road of constant craving. But—Kierkegaard again—the opposite of sin is not virtue; the opposite of sin is faith.

So what is sin? Which behaviors, which list? My gay parishioner from long ago is back in the room. We know the Bible offers many lists and tables of sins, yet Jesus never pins anyone to hell's wall with lists. Why then do Christians persist with their fevers? In all the Bible, I have found only one definition of sin. It is in Paul's letter to the Romans.

"Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another," he begins. "The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. But those who are double-minded are condemned, because they do not act from faith. For whatever comes not from faith is sin." (Romans 14: 13, 22-23)

See this key and its door. Touch, and open: sin—all sins, without exception—arises from despair that Reality (one of whose names is God) is trustworthy. No behavior that expresses your faith in God is sin. Period. No more discussion needed. Of course there is sexual sin, when one who has once felt God's command then twists in double-mindedness over this partner versus that one, and duplicity replaces the simplicity of love. Of course. But no behavior is sin which helps express your trust in God.

Finally, let it be plain that taking sin seriously is also a question of proportion. Our life is mostly not about sin, separation, and despair. In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words, we must "prevent a pathological over-burdening of life by the ethical" by limiting our consideration of matters like these today to certain times and places. Whoever wants to laminate lists of law of God for easy reference and judgment is himself athwart the God's law of love. For the chief end of humans, in John Calvin's undying phrase, "is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Therefore, go from this place confident that with soul friends around you and you around them, you may run this life full out, not worrying the question of transgression, which will be shown you, but giving all your heart and mind and strength to the possibility of progression in faith, trusting that God is giving you, in due season, your happiness, your communion, your integrity, your simplicity, your self in Christ. May this be your only constant craving.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

*First Presbyterian Church
Brooklyn, New York*

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