

## THE CROSS AND THE GRAVITY OF SIN

Genesis 3:1-7

Psalm 51: 2, 4, 12-13

Romans 5:12, 14, 15b, 18-19

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, October 31, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part of an ongoing sermon series "The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Genesis 3:1-7**

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; but God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die."' But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,\* knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*

### **Psalm 51: 2, 4, 12-13**

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,  
and cleanse me from my sin...*

*Against you, you alone, have I sinned,  
and done what is evil in your sight,  
so that you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.*

### **Romans 5:12, 14, 15b**

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned... Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many... Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.*

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon series is inspired and draws largely from the book by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, published in 2015 by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

**Prayer:** *The house of our souls is too cramped and meager for you to visit. Our rooms are small and we can't even offer a comfortable chair. Yet you seek entrance anyway. You have the capacity to enlarge our souls. We ask you to do so, so that we might hear your word, understand you better, and respond out of our hearing and understanding. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.*

## I.

A few years ago one of my colleagues in this Presbytery preached a series of sermons on “The Seven Deadly Sins.” I happened to be at an event where I overheard someone I did not know say, “I visited this church on Sunday, but the minister was preaching on ‘Seven Deadly Sins,’ and I’m not going to go back there. It is too depressing.”

I don’t if that person is still searching for a church, but if she is, I doubt that today’s title – “The Cross and the Gravity of Sin” – would draw her here. I thought about using for the title a phrase from our Prayer of Confession – “...there is no health in us”; but it occurred to me that to put a title like that on the church sign during COVID would not encourage in-person attendance.

The truth is that all of us come to worship – at least in large measure – because we want to *feel better*: about ourselves, our family, our work, our health, our world, the condition of our souls and psyches. If we are willing to confess and face the reality of Sin, we want to do so only followed by a full-throated assurance of pardon. We want to leave worship renewed, forgiven, uplifted, ready to face the week with hope, determination, and – dare we say – a measure of joy. We might even say: “I do not need the church or the minister to remind me that there is Sin and Evil in the world. I experience that every day. I want church to be a place of light and hope, not darkness and despair.”

I fully appreciate this sympathy. While I think few if any of us who come to Westminster do so without an awareness of what Dr. Gardner C. Taylor referred to as “the ‘gone wrongness’ of the world,”<sup>2</sup> I believe that as worshippers if we seek to *downplay* the reality of Sin and Evil, we deny the *true condition* of our *world* and our *lives* “after the Fall.” In this intermittent series on the crucifixion of Christ, I want to stress that we can only face the *awfulness* of the crucifixion if we understand the power of Sin and Evil the cross overcomes. It takes more than a teaspoon to drain an ocean.

## II.

So a bit about the characteristics of Sin is in order.

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We need first to make a *distinction* between “Sin” (singular) and “sins” plural. The church has often narrated the Christian faith in terms of *individual faults* – sins plural – that can be overcome by a decision to repent.<sup>3</sup> But Sin is not just an individual act. Sin is a *power*, not simply a mistake, an impulsive act, a poor decision.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gardner Taylor used this phrase in an audiotape of sermon at Riverside Church in 1977. It has stuck with me ever since.

<sup>3</sup> Rutledge 168.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 4:6 uses the image of “sin crouching at the door” for Cain. Examples from the Pauline epistles where sin is depicted as a power or force include Romans 5:12-19; Romans 7:14-25, especially verses 16-20; Romans 8:37-39; Colossians 1:16, 2:15; Ephesians 6:12.

In Flannery O'Connor's short story *Wise Blood*, Haze Moses is held hostage by a crazed blind man. He demands that Haze repent of his sins and to them one by one, beginning with blasphemy and fornication. But Haze refuses:

"They ain't nothing but words," Haze says. "If I was in sin, I was in it before I ever committed any."

Haze bears witness to the reality that Sin is a *power*, not just an *action*.<sup>5</sup>

As a power, Sin manifests itself in actions that *we* and *others* take – some intentional, some unintentional; some malicious, some minor – and in actions we don't take, called "sins of omission." But as a power, Sin is *larger* than *any one* of our actions, or *all of them* combined.

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As a power, Sin *invades* and *occupies* institutions, families, relationships, churches, nations, civilization. Sin can be found in the most idealistic movements for social justice as well as in the most responsible efforts at preserving the *status quo*. It infects forms of government and economic systems. It takes root in military invasions and diplomatic resolutions. It lives in police forces and civilian review boards. It greets occupants of jail cells and monasteries. Its voice can be detected in calls for "law and order" and "defund the police."

Reinhold Niebuhr once referred to "the immoral elements in all historical success."<sup>6</sup> He was right. Not even the deliverance of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, nor their entrance into the Promised Land of Canaan, nor their return from Babylonian Exile occurred without Sin. Neither did the settlement of our own nation, the war we fought that brought an end to slavery, the defeat we exacted of Nazism in World War II and Communism in the Cold War.

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As a power, Sin is barely distinguishable from the Evil of *tragedies* and *natural disasters* that tear at our hearts. I have long believed that it is the power of Sin and Evil – with its ever-present hovering over the world – that leads such things as

- That leads such things as Haiti never seeming to shake free from earthquakes
- That leads genocide and ethnic cleansing to never be quite dispatched
- That leads children to be gunned down by stray bullets
- That leads a father to stumble on a stairway and tumble to his death
- That leads infants not to awaken from a nap
- That leads the sins of the parents to visit the children for three or four generations<sup>7</sup>
- And that drafts beautiful young children into an epic war against cancer they must wage in their own bodies surrounded by people who love them and would replace them as combatants if they could.

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<sup>5</sup> Rutledge 194.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, in *Love and Justice: Selections From the Shorter Writings from Reinhold Niebuhr*, edited by D. B. Robertson, (Atlanta: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957) page 298; originally in "Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility," *Christianity and Crisis* 3, (October 4, 1943), 2. I am grateful for Westminster member and novelist Tom Young for using this quote in one of his early novels and pointing me to its source.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 14:18, and other places repeated in the Old Testament.

In the Genesis story of the Fall of the human race, one of the consequences that immediately follows is a breach between humanity and nature, between serpent and woman, soil and man, beauty and pain in childbirth.<sup>8</sup>

The sufferings we receive at the hand of nature are due to the *power* of Sin, not *simply* or *solely* to sins we may have *committed*. The one time Jesus says “No” is to a question he himself asks: “Did the eighteen who died with the Tower of Siloam fell perish because they were worse sinner than others?” “No,” he said. “No, no, no.”<sup>9</sup> Suffering and natural disasters, calamities and “acts of God” are not punishment for sins we commit. They are manifestations of the *power* of Sin. They come because we are all members of “the fraternity of Adam.”<sup>10</sup> Cardinal Newman described these as part of a “vast primordial catastrophe.”<sup>11</sup>

### III.

In nearly all parts of scripture, Sin is given eloquent and poignant attention.

After committing the “crime of the century” in which he lived, King David put pen to parchment in prayer:

*Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity [he cried to God],  
and cleanse me from my sin...  
...you are justified in your sentence  
and blameless when you pass judgement.*

Paul wrote members of the church at Rome he had never met:

*Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.*

The Genesis narrator concludes the story of the Fall with this epigraph:

*Then the eyes of both were opened,  
and they knew that they were naked;  
and they sewed fig leaves together  
and made loincloths for themselves.*

We know there is “no health in us.” We know that we are naked. It is a reality we cannot hide with loincloths.

### IV.

In the Reformed Tradition of Christianity, we believe that our *awareness of Sin only comes from God’s grace*. We know the power of Sin because God first knows us. Our knowledge of Sin comes from our knowledge of grace.

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<sup>8</sup> In Genesis 3:14-19, virtually every response God promises Adam, Eve, and the serpent after the Fall involves a conflict between humanity and nature.

<sup>9</sup> Luke 14:4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Rutledge 178.

<sup>11</sup> Brendan Gill, “In Vino Veritas,” *The New Yorker* (April 12, 1976), quoted by Rutledge 185n46.

The most popular hymn in our nation bears witness to this:

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear  
And grace my fears relieved.*

It was a slave trader, John Newton, who wrote this hymn, several years after a dramatic conversion in a storm at sea led him to come to terms with the reality that trading in other human beings was contrary to the faith in which God had so dramatically spoken to him and to give up his trade.<sup>12</sup>

“Before guilt,” says Fleming Rutledge, “grace.” “*Before guilt, grace.*”<sup>13</sup>

My friends, what prepares us for the *gruesomeness* of the Crucifixion of Christ is the knowledge that that it is only the *death* of the *Almighty God* on the *cross* – and the resurrection that validates it – that has the power to release us from the power of Sin and Evil.

Another hymn expresses this:

*Upon the cross of Jesus  
mine eye at times can see  
the very dying form of One  
who suffered there for me...*<sup>14</sup>

Until we have become aware of God’s grace, we have – in Anselm’s words – “not yet considered the weight of Sin.”<sup>15</sup>

Because “grace before guilt,” our awareness of the gravity of Sin, of the power of Evil, does not have to be an act of *despair*. Our awareness, no matter how painful in the present, is a gift of grace and a source of hope.

*...and from my stricken heart with tears  
two wonders I confess,  
the wonders of redeeming love  
and my unworthiness.*<sup>16</sup>

The text we read today from Paul ends in hope.

*Therefore just as one man’s trespass  
led to condemnation for all,  
so one man’s act of righteousness  
leads to justification and life for all.*

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<sup>12</sup> John Newton, “Amazing Grace, 1779. See [https://hymnary.org/text/amazing\\_grace\\_how\\_sweet\\_the\\_sound](https://hymnary.org/text/amazing_grace_how_sweet_the_sound)

<sup>13</sup> Rutledge 171.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Cecilia Clephane, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus,” 1868; see [https://hymnary.org/text/beneath\\_the\\_cross\\_of\\_jesus\\_i\\_fain\\_would](https://hymnary.org/text/beneath_the_cross_of_jesus_i_fain_would).

<sup>15</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?* Quoted in Rutledge 193.

<sup>16</sup> “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.”

And King David:

*Restore to me the joy of your salvation,  
and sustain in me a willing spirit.  
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,  
and sinners will return to you.*

V.

The only way I know to end this sermon is to summarize it.

- Sin is a *power*, singular, not just *acts* we commit, plural.
- Our *awareness* of the *power of Sin* paves the way for us to understand the *suffering* of the cross, the *meaning* of the crucifixion.
- It is *grace* that makes it possible for us to understand the power of Sin.

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound,  
That saved a wretch; like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

Amen.

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