

A Sermon for Lent 5, Year B
April 2, 2006 — Psalm 51
The Rev. Deacon Robert S. Streepy

The Power of Sin

This morning we read together Psalm 51, which has traditionally been ascribed in the psalter as “A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came unto him, after he had gone in to Bath-sheba.” The background story, which is told in the book of II Samuel, involves King David of Jerusalem, who sees Bath-sheba sunning on her rooftop one afternoon and is smitten by her beauty. Now Bath-sheba was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, and David was already married as well (in fact, he has several wives). But Bath-sheba returns David’s interest, and within no time at all she is expecting a child. To cover up their adultery, David attempts to trick Uriah, who is a soldier, into returning home to his wife, but he refuses to return to his house as long as his fellow warriors are living in tents. Frustrated by Uriah’s obstinacy, David finally orders Uriah to lead an attack, but also directs his generals to withdraw from that attack and abandon Uriah to the enemy. Uriah is then killed in battle, and after a respectful period of mourning, Bath-sheba marries David.

At this point of the story, scripture proclaims “But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (II Samuel 11:27). Consequently, God sends the prophet Nathan to tell David a story about a poor man who loved one little lamb, and a rich man who, even though he already had many lambs, took the poor man’s beloved little lamb. Incensed by the story, David demands to know the name of the rich man so he can punish him as he had shown no pity. Nathan curtly replies, “Thou *art* the man.” Stung by Nathan’s rebuke and chastened, David replies “I have sinned against the Lord,” and, according to tradition, writes the psalm we recited this morning. In both the book of II Samuel and today’s psalm, David unequivocally admits that he what he has done is a sin.

Sin: now *there’s* a word that can suck the air right out of the room. I’ve been attending the Episcopal Church over twenty years now – which I realize makes me a new-bee compared to some of you – and I can safely say that during that time I can’t recall *ever* hearing a sermon about sin. There’s a good reason for that, as the topic generally makes us uncomfortable. Sin has a strong implication of judgment, and since in the modern church we don’t like to judge each other, we tend to avoid the topic altogether. Even the lectionary reflects our discomfort about the topic of sin. While I was working on this sermon I checked the lectionary link on our web site and noticed that there were two alternative readings of the psalm for this morning – what we read this morning, and a shorter, more upbeat, morning devotional version, stressing right relations with God. I called Sheri, and even though she had prepared the readings with the shorter version weeks ago, she cheerfully volunteered to prepare new readings for this morning – we are blessed by a great parish secretary – so we could all get our morning offering of sin.

So I think it’s safe to say that both culture and the church are uncomfortable with the topic of sin. That’s unfortunate, because as a wit remarked, sin is the only doctrine of the Christian Church for which there is empirical evidence. I believe that we are uncomfortable with sin because we don’t understand it. And as a result of our misunderstanding of sin, we either dilute or concentrate it.

The first approach to sin is to dilute it. We do this by referring to sin as either “corporate” or “cultural” rather than a personal responsibility. This is especially prevalent in progressive churches such as, well, ours. Even though we might be reluctant to judge individuals, we don’t hesitate to condemn the societal sins of racism or sexism. This week the House of Bishops recently issued a pastoral letter condemning the sin of institutionalized racism, and directed that their letter be read in all the parishes. Now, I agree that racism is reprehensible, and that its perfidy permeates our culture. However, the Bishops’ response was to seek to invite more people to participate in committees discussing matters such as, well, institutional sins. When the baseball commissioner gave the hostages freed from two years captivity in Iran free baseball passes for life, some wag remarked, “haven’t they suffered enough?” The Bishops address *their* concern about sin, but I wonder if they have really accomplished anything. In this view of sin, if *everybody’s* responsible for sin, then *nobody’s* really responsible.

The other approach to sin can be called the traditional method, which is probably best represented by the Ten Commandments mentality. Now, learning the Ten Commandments, as the young people in the Confirmation Class are doing, is a good idea. The more we know about the historical foundations of faith the better Christians we are. Books such as *The Da Vinci Code* would neither challenge the faith of believers nor spawn a cottage industry of books refuting its historical and theological inaccuracies if Christians were more aware of the fundamentals of their faith, such as the debates that resulted in the Nicene Creed, which, incidentally, are *precisely* the same issues raised in *The Da Vinci Code*.

In the traditional view of sin, people fear that if they violate one of those commandments, if they break one of “God’s rules,” then God will turn God’s back on them, and they’ll be tossed in that lake that burns with fire and sulfur. The Roman Emperor Constantine, who established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, delayed being baptized until he was on his death bed for fear that he would sin after baptism and be condemned by God. The medieval system of confession and penance is based on this, and still infects our culture. In this view, sin has the power to destroy us, regardless of the saving work of God through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

But I’m here to tell you boldly this morning that both views are wrong for Christians. Sin has no power over us; *we*, the members of the living body of the Lord, *we* have the power, given to us by God through the pledge of the Holy Spirit. And because *we* have the power, I believe that God doesn’t want us sitting around, twiddling our thumbs; God wants us *doing* things – helping out at breakfast at St. Paul’s, serving lunch at the Ronald MacDonald house, reading stories in the Children’s Chapel, bringing new songs to the choir, blessing the parish with a new organ. And when we get up and *do* things we are bound to bump into each other; it’s the natural consequence of bodies in motion. At those times when we would sink back into ourselves, God doesn’t cut us any slack: as Paul wrote the church in Rome, “There is *no* condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). So if somebody tries to lay a guilt trip on you about institutionalized sin, or threaten you with the Ten Commandments, you just tell them “we are in Christ Jesus, and there is *no* condemnation for us.” And then show the world what Christians freed of sin’s power and empowered by God can do. “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine” (Ephesians 3:20). Amen.