

JEREMIAH 4:11-12, 22-28 or EXODUS 32:7-14

PSALM 14 or PSALM 51:1-10

I TIMOTHY 1:12-17

LUKE 15:1-10

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 11, 2022; Year C

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Lousy Language! Loving Language?

“Sin!” “Sinful!” “Sinner!” These very convicting words have a rather sadistic, sinister, “serpentesque” kind of sound about them! Yes, they just sizzle! These very condemnatory words conjure up oppressively negative images, reminders, at least for some of us, of bygone days in our lives when we were constantly being barraged with, nagged about, the consequences of our evil, wicked, ways, reminding us that we were and perhaps still are wretches or worms or wretched worms! Frankly, the only “Sinner” I care to know about is that tennis player named Jannik Sinner, who just played in the U. S. Open! Frankly, I think that sin is overrated! And while we are on the subject, imagine that NHL player with the last name Satan, spelled S-A-T-A-N? And what about those baseball players with the last name Pagan, spelled P-A-G-A-N? Oh well, what’s in a name? In 1973 world renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote his epic, groundbreaking thesis on sin. In raising the question in a book by the same title, *Whatever Became of Sin*, Menninger theorized, projected a “day when sin would no longer be an element of the human vernacular. He speculated that the explanation of sin and wrongdoing would be replaced by rationalizations excusing individual accountability,” and I would add “responsibility.” In many ways Menninger was dead red, spot on, yes, absolutely and astutely correct, with his thoughtful assessment, with many today choosing to disregard this very loaded term, a word full of

condemnation, guilt, judgment, and all kinds of vitriolic overtones. Even so, in many evangelical, conservative or fundamentalist, circles, “sin” continues to be popular and prevalent, pervasively dominating the essential fabric woven into the vocabulary of services and sermons, familiar language in sectarian churches that seem permanently stuck in a variety of traditional paradigms. Sin based churchly verbosity is the inflammatory stuff that is all around us! Not hard to find! You barely need go looking for it! Yes, it is right around the corner! The question for us today is, “Is our avoidance of facing our frail, fragile, and oft flawed humanity a good thing?” I think the answer is probably, most likely, somewhere in the middle, somewhere between yes and no, perhaps even yes and no! Let’s be honest with ourselves, evil is real, the raging wickedness inherently characterized within some individuals, unfortunately germane to a certain segment of the population, is an unfortunate fact from which we cannot escape! On that we cannot defer, deflect, or deny! We cannot avoid or ignore! We do so at our own peril! It was the late John Shelby Spong’s assertion that the prevalence of sin in society is a reminder that humanity has not yet fully evolved. He may indeed have been on to something significant with that sober assessment. And today of all days, we are reminded of an ultimate sin, the perpetration of violence inflicted upon our nation as we remember all too well our solemn observance of 9-11, yes, sin on steroids! Even with or despite evil seemingly unplugged, unhinged, in our world, whenever I must whenever forced to choose between guilt and grace I am always bound to come down on the side of grace because grace is born of God and grace never obsesses on sin, is never fixated on sinfulness in measuring the depth and breadth, the capacity of human beings in our ultimate quest to live into our better, even our best, selves.

No matter how far removed we think we are, we are not that far removed from our Puritan New England Great Awakening days, and

much closer to home, the nineteenth century revivalist fervor that swept the nation with its obsessively getting saved evangelistic fervor, complete with the new musical genre called the Gospel Song, much more emotional, intimate, and personal than traditional hymnody, hymns being reserved for highbrow church worship. Yes, the revival meeting became an alternative and evangelical version of the liturgical calendar for many Free Church Protestant and Pentecostal participants. Spring and fall and win them all! Yes, I made up that endearing slogan! Put it on a bumper sticker or a church marquee! I can never forget the way the Puritans taught the alphabet to their young, coining a catchy phrase to accompany each letter as it was memorized by rote, a most graphic object lesson. For example, to learn the first letter of the alphabet, "A," the child would recite "In Adam's fall, man sinned all!" Just warms the heart, doesn't it? And so, it went, devolving from there! I will never forget reading for the first-time in my college American Literature class pastor Jonathan Edwards' fiery sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," a classic Great Awakening homiletical nightmare filled with sermonical hellfire and brimstone, containing graphic warnings of hell and its fury, white hot flames complete with a fiery furnace roasting sinners in their eternal weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Oh, happy day! God's love on full display! What an impression Edwards' sermon made back in the day! No wonder these puritanical zealots burned at the stake every slightly quirky or serendipitously spontaneous soul they cruelly and demonically perceived to be witches! The most poignant warning in the sermon takes place where Edwards describes the damnation awaiting non-repentant sinners, risking their worst fate, as they precariously hung over the fires of hell, suspended like a spider from a web, one strand keeping these imperiled reprobates from becoming God's barbecue! I stole that line from my late friend and mentor who saw that horrific sign on a church marquee from back in the day in LA, lower Alabama! Sin, we would just as soon forget about it, but it continues to loom large as a major plank in the biblical narrative and thus in our lives, a

huge part of our ecclesiological and theological history, a doctrinal millstone from which we cannot escape if we are to honestly engage the whole story of our story, the Bible. Join me on a homiletical journey exploring the pitfalls and the delights of sin and sinfulness!

I wish to call to your attention, as we continue our sermon together, to an article from back in the day called “Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture.” As a young seminarian I remember being spellbound in 1985 when my soon-to-be Master of Theology (ThM) supervisory professor Dr. Bill J. Leonard began a lecture in Alumni Chapel that became the article in question, subsequently published in Southern Seminary’s theological journal called *Review and Expositor*. “Getting Saved in America” describes a typical rural “southernesque” revival meeting, surely something akin to a tent revival minus the tent. According to Leonard’s recollection it was a meeting that probably took place at Camp Zion in Myrtle, Mississippi. In the heat of the night Leonard was “introduced to one way of getting saved in America, what he thought at the time, as with many of us who grew up in that revivalist culture, was the only way, what he described as “the traumatic event which chronicled the day and the moment from here to eternity.” Turn from sin and pray the prayer and all would be well, all would be forgiven. Go and sin some more, I mean no more! Leonard sets the stage! “In the sultry heat of a July evening a throng of worshipers moves toward the open-ended tabernacle from which the sounds of organ music—vibrato blaring—fill the summer air. They enter the building to sit on rough, straight-back pews on which are strewn the worn gospel hymnbooks. The air is heavy with the smell of sawdust which covers the floor. There is singing, then prayers, accompanied by an occasional ‘Yes, Lord’ and ‘Thank you, Jesus,’ spoken spontaneously from the congregation. The preacher enters the pulpit and the sermon begins. The words come pouring from his mouth, warming the already heated night: ‘saved . . . lost . . . heaven . . . hell . . . blood bought . . . Bible-believing . . . crucifixion . . . resurrection . . . second coming. . . .’”

He missed or left out “rapture! “And the sins—sins of sex and alcohol, lying and cheating, disobeying parents, dancing, movies, skipping church, refusing to believe the Bible, rejecting the Holy Spirit.” He missed or left out card playing and gambling! We don’t smoke and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls who do! We don’t drink and we don’t dance, we don’t play cards, we can’t take the chance! “And then the answer: JESUS!” And I would add that you must make that word into eight syllables for it to take hold and have any real salvific effect! “Believe on him, fear him, follow him. Finally comes the call: ‘Come and be saved. Stand, sing, and sing some more.’

*Just as I am without one plea
But that Thy Blood was shed for me’
and that Thou bidst me come to Thee
O Lamb of God, I come*

They come—first one and then another. Some come in stoic silence, some with quiet abandon, some in torrents of tears. And with their coming all heaven breaks loose: shouts of ‘Glory,’ ‘Praise the Lord,’ ‘Hallelujah,’ as salvation and revival come to a people. The crowd responds, the preacher responds, the organ responds. Then, all are seated once again for another preacher has been chosen, another sermon is ready to be proclaimed. There is plenty of time for one more service, one more call to repentance, that is, if Jesus tarries. . . .¹

In our lection from Luke today we read the first two of a trilogy of parables, two short and one very long. They are called the “Lost” parables because they operate in the lost and found department of the Gospels. We have before us the parable about the ninety-nine and one sheep. We then read the parable of the woman who has ten coins and loses one, only to search carefully, diligently, until she joyfully

¹Bill J. Leonard, “Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture. *Review and Expositor*.

finds her precious lost coinage. The parable we do not read, because it gets a Lenten Sunday all its own, is the parable called “The Prodigal Son,” though that traditional title given to it is never mentioned in the narrative. In each story something or someone that is lost is subsequently found, a moment of great relief and greater rejoicing. In these sacred texts we see a very innocent, a benign, word, “lost” that will become toxically laden, layered and loaded with horrifically negative and damnable imagery, crusted with linguistic patina, exacerbated when its opposite, not “found,” but “saved”, is thrust into the equation, creating an ecclesial juggernaut, a monstrous guilt trip fueled by guilt over grace, sin over salvation, judgment over love, damnation over forgiveness, hellfire over peace and mercy, repentance over renewal, restoration, and reformation. Guilt! Guilt! Guilt! And more guilt, guilt upon guilt! Yes, these sacred salvation stories have been hijacked and held hostage for hundreds of years, corrupted yes, beyond belief! Yes, the two parables end with two more very incendiary terms, “sinner,” and “repent,” i.e., repentance. All these words combined create a runaway train historically used to frighten, manipulate, threaten, condemn, and judge the very people God claims to love unconditionally, the same people Jesus engaged and welcomed just as they were, just as we are. Sure, the rabbi told many an individual to go and sin no more, but he never threatened them with a stick instead of a carrot, telling them they would burn in an unquenchable fire if they did not toe the line and get with the program. After all our epistle lection from I Timothy reminds us that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners! No, his cousin John, as in Mr. T. Baptist, had already done that damage, causing a penitential dumpster fire prior to Jesus’ arrival on the smoldering scene, the gates of hell created, codified, and exacerbated by the early Church to enforce all its manipulative agendas! These, my friends were the misconceptions, misinterpretations, and misappropriations developed by the early Church to keep their fearful and anxious, oft ignorant and illiterate, constituents in check. And

many of us carry the bruises, the scars, as daily companions, a constant reminder of our woundedness, wounds that are slow if ever to fully heal, call it a form of religious PTSD revealing our spiritually compromised ecclesiological and theological flashbacks, all happening as if it were only yesterday. Oh, who well I remember, coerced, nagged constantly about walking the aisle and making what is called a “public profession of faith,” affirming my lostness and my desperate need to be saved. Yes, we carry the baggage vulnerable as we are, all the fearful residual lingering from all the reinforced horrific promises, the not-so-veiled threats, made to us if we failed to follow Jesus according to those in the know and who had the unchecked authority who demanded allegiance to what seemed to be an ever-moving straight and narrow line.

Another resource I wish to call your attention to this morning is a book that has become an epic guide in its own right. Matthew Fox is a former Catholic theologian who was banished from the Catholic Church because he could not toe the line and drink the toxic Kool Aid forced down the throats of the faithful, promulgated by pontifical powers, proffered by priests, who created so much imaginary theological doctrine used to meet any immediate ecclesial concern raised by the men who were always out to manipulate the system and the flock to gain and consolidate control, to wield their privileged power. Fox’s book *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality* approaches the traditionally flawed but very convenient interpretation of the second creation story that introduces sin and the serpent, a being who eventually became Satan, the devil personified, early in the Genesis narrative. Fox’s imaging is a worthwhile read! I recommend turning aside and seeing that great sight! A major plank in Fox’s argument is that we desperately need to take another look, reconsider the way we have long interpreted the story of God and Adam and Eve and the serpent, egregiously mistaking this epic tale as literal history factually describing the moment that humanity made its first colossal,

ginormous, seemingly innocuous, boo-boo, the man and the woman discovering that they were naked and now ashamed of their birthday suit, perpetually tormented and punished because of one major or minor slipup! Seriously! The doctrine of Original Sin has been used to keep the faithful in line, pigeon holed in their shameful place, exuding guilt over grace, eternally at risk of hellfire and brimstone because of a matter of opinions, the result of the blessing and gift of a free-thinking creative conscience made manifest because they dared eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, yes, making them wholly and completely human, the way they were created and intended to be. Let's all eat! I love the image of one unknown commentator who suggests that when they ate this forbidden fruit that God looked at the serpent and winked! Yes, this story should offer us nothing but positive metaphors! Perhaps even worse than that, Original Sin has been used to freely abuse and randomly persecute women, to relegate them as second-class Christian citizens, blaming them as the sole progenitor of sin, harbingers who tempted the easily beguiled man—that is probably true—bringing sin into the world because of the passion surrounding a fruit tree. Yes, women have been damned, marked, for all time because they were first in what has come to be irrationally called the Edenic Fall—complete and utter nonsense—a damnably horrific doctrinal mutation codified in the creeds, all by design meant to keep men in power in their authoritatively ecclesial high places. Sadly, for most of more than two thousand years this perverse perception has worked to a tee, like a charm, baby! But thank God, the wheels are coming off that very unsteady wagon! Today's musings are a reminder of the gift and the danger, the risk and reward, of language. Today is a reminder of the power of words when we choose to narrowly define and use them in ways no doubt ever intended to be injurious or harmful, loaded, as if they were weapons of mass destruction! Original Sin is the unfortunate gift that keeps on giving, the source from which all judgments flow! Original blessing? Original grace? Original love? Original peace? Original

mercy? Folks, it is no contest! Not even close! Sign me up for the good stuff!

I will never forget the radical musings of my Professor of Systematic Theology, the late Frank Tupper, who used to talk about being fascinated with the fact that we teach young children the warm and fuzzy that God is love, that God loves them, comforting and reassuring them with the assurance of just how much God loves them, promising them that God loves them unconditionally, all but swearing that there were no exceptions, no qualifiers, no ifs, ands, or buts. But then on a certain day, a day that can never be fully determined, often called the mythical “age of accountability,” suddenly these same children who were absolutely loved yesterday, today became “blankety-blank” sinners disgusting the God who supposedly loved them. Tupper intentionally chose to use the strongest and most offensive language possible to make his saliently sobering point as he described in detail this theological nonsense, total theological psychobabble. One day, life in all its delightful discoveries and wonderful mysteries, with its myriad beliefs and its faith formations, was all good. All was well until it was not, when at the very next moment you suddenly find yourself at odds with the Holy, outside the safety of a sacred bubble, the divine womb that comforted and nurtured you. Somehow you were strangely, in a most bizarre twist of fate, transformed into the worst, transparently exposing your true authentically evil and sinful self. Somehow you had strangely become a “lost” person who needed a quick, immediate, fix, the chance to be “saved,” all the while the risk of damnation seeming to far outweigh any efficacious eternal reward, the whims that now might or might not be granted by a fickle deity whose petulance could rival the most selfishly immature and childish human being. This theistic God masquerading in male form, complete with a robe and a white beard, sitting on a throne, unfortunately continued to resemble, parroting and portraying, the worst adjectives and attributes imaginable, giving a one-sided, heavily slanted, view of

the God schizophrenically described in the Hebrew Bible rather than the consistently loving God of unimaginable goodness and grace espoused and emulated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, a rabbi who lived and taught love as his defining principle and guide. Grace! Grace! Grace! And more grace, grace upon grace!

Today we have had the pleasure and privilege of baptizing Bowen Marlowe Jakimzak, joyfully celebrating this holy sacrament as beloved faith community, welcoming him into this household of faith and into the Church universal, yes, holy and catholic and apostolic, all the above combined! I never want there to be a day in which this child, or any child, ever wonders about the status of her or his soul. Never do I want an innocent creation of the Holy to fearfully question God's saving and eternal love, anxiety ridden over the status of their salvation. Yes, that is what I insist upon for every child, every child of the God who creatively imaged us to exact specifications, like a mirror, yes, a mirror image, the One who made and molded us no matter our age, uniquely forming our being, yes, every daughter or son who comes our way as we seek to help one another travel our unique journeys. This is our sacrosanct covenantal commitment to our communal cause, our promise to each other to nurture and nourish all persons as we mature and evolve in our individual and collective faith formation, allowing us all the doubt we can ever muster while honoring all our questions, our skepticism, even whatever cynicism we might bring to our congregational conversations as we learn and grow and become our authentic self, the best we can be as we become all we were created to be. I never want any of us to have even the slightest hint that there is something wrong, something amiss, something wrong with us, any question mark overwhelming or stealing our joy in terms of God's pervasive and overwhelming love for all of us, each one of us created in the divine image, *imago Dei*. Sadly, terms like "lost" and "saved" and of course, including "sin," "sinful", and "sinner" have become far more than dangerous buzz or

code words, they have become inflammatory idols, idolatrous images, the religious golden calves of our day. used to separate and subjugate. Made into perverse formulas and prayers that turn our relationship with God into some pedestrian quid pro quo transactional enterprise they leave us cold as if calculated, confused and lacking in any degree of warmth and security. You scratch God's itch and God will scratch yours! You say the right words in your humble confessions, praying "the prayer" we all had to learn, yes, a prayer some of us were forced to memorize and recite by heart, then and only then will God be willing to crack open the floodgates of heaven's glory divine, granting all that is goodly glorious and gracious but kept at bay, safely out of reach, until you boldly or timidly dare and choose to unlock the secrets to the key that opens the door that selfishly and stingily holds them back and only doles them out when all the right combinations are accessed. Unless these terms can be used and applied appropriately, and yes, they indeed can be and still do have a proper place, but unless and until simply put them in their place! Put them where they belong! Put them in the dustbin, the rearview mirror, of the Church's beautiful and sordid history! For in the final analysis these religiously influenced, spiritually flavored concepts, were surely meant to be positive, productive, words, designed as ideas and images intended to draw us closer to God and to one another, yes, loving, not lousy, language! And in closing, let me recall for you the words attributed to the great German reformer Martin Luther, who was purported to have once said, "Sin boldly, that grace may abound!" Rather good advice, I think! After all, we can all meet this goal, this low bar, yes, low hanging fruit! If you get my drift!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and has never lost a soul, assuring us in Christ Jesus that everyone is found, yes "saved" indeed! Amen and amen.

