

GENESIS 21:8-21

PSALM 86:1-10, 16-17

ROMANS 6:1b-11

MATTHEW 10:24-39

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost; Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

A Celebration of PRIDE

June 25, 2023; Year A

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

A Corpse Is a Corpse, of Course, of Course!

Sin! In the south that toxic word is screamed from pulpits far and wide with the amazingly uncanny ability to make it eight syllables! Except for certain evangelical hotspots sin is a subject we avoid like the proverbial plague, a topic that rolls eyes and makes us wish we were someplace else. In 1973 world-renowned psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote his epic volume, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* and predicted that this word would eventually expire, be eradicated, extricated, totally eliminated, from the human vernacular, replaced with rationalizations excusing the slings and arrows of individual accountability, including familiar terms that are now commonplace. Yes, our vocabulary now includes daily references to illness, disorder, dysfunction, syndrome, etc., all these psychological diagnoses filling volumes with complex clinical content. Yes, to a large degree Menninger was right, dead red in his prognostication. Yes, I have always found it interesting that this captivating book was not written by a theologian or biblical scholar, but by someone who explores the complex mystery of our brains!

It is not that sin no longer exists, but it is a topic we would rather ignore or redefine in ways that keeps all the nasty things associated with sinning and sinfulness further than arm's length away from us, ironically making it a more user-friendly term, kinder and gentler, less accusatory and judgmental, removing our accountability and responsibility. And not only that, but sin is a moving target. As we are all aware, one person's sin is another person's pleasure! These

presumed negative activities are either mutually exclusive or mutually inclusive as if all the same. I will never forget Bill Leonard, professor of Church History at Southern Seminary, making this observation to us students, “Aren’t we glad we all lived long enough to enjoy the things that we were told were sinful?” Amen! Growing up we young conservative Baptists were given a laundry list of dos and don’ts, forbidden to drink alcohol, warned about the dangers of playing cards and dancing—Insert old joke about why Baptists do not have sex standing up? It might lead to dancing—listening to rock ‘n roll music. Yes, there were some youth groups using rock ‘n roll albums in bonfires, kind of like banning or burning books. And then of course, there was the ever-present danger of getting a little too intimate on a date, and of course, never allowing ourselves to become biblical with the opposite sex in that euphemistically suggestive way. And of course, we were not to swear, never to be found guilty of using a certain creative vocabulary. As we used to say, “We don’t smoke, and we don’t chew, and we don’t go with girls who do!” My favorite sign on a casino in Billings, Montana was constructed so that the “ca” and the “o” blink on and off, revealing the remainder, “sin.” Gotta love it!

So, on this joyful day of gladness and rejoicing, on a day the United Church of Christ has proudly proclaimed as “PRIDE Sunday, a day celebrating the beautiful variety of human diversity, respecting and honoring every human being created in the amazing image of the Divine, why in the world would we, specifically me, choose to talk about sin? Well, the short answer is because it is there, yes, in the text, a major concern of the self-appointed apostle Paul who often seems to obsess on the subject. There it is, right there in the book of Romans, evidently this local church a hotbed of sinful activity, a congregation prone to sinning, perhaps a reflection of the local culture of Rome, a familiar feature seemingly commensurate with numerous gentile enclaves. And don’t even get me started on the Greek Isles, the Hellenistic cultures especially fast and loose in a host of ways. But the more serious, reflective, answer to this question for the morning is that sin continues to be very real, and I am not talking about what Luther’s confessor, his erstwhile tutor, Johann von Staupitz, described as picadilloes, you know, the litany of inane, innocent, and insignificant vices that traumatize many Christians. Frankly when it comes to the minutiae of a host of inanelly trivial habits, I lean into words once attributed to Martin Luther, commenting on this very text, his being a tremendous advocate for the book of Romans, a true disciple and lover

of Paul. "Sin boldly, that grace may abound!" The beer guzzling former monk and priest may not have said it, but I sure love the sentiment and it seems to fit Luther's narrative and sarcastic wit. **Paul, of course, warned his reader, "Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply? Absolutely not!" Paul just was not a whole lot of fun! Don't bring Paul to the party! And with those stern images of the apostle as background, we are off and running today.**

Regarding sin, Paul asks "how can we still live in it?" Yes, inquiring minds want to know! He reminds his reader, then and now, that we have been baptized into Christ Jesus, buried with him through baptism into his death, and indeed, raised to walk in newness of life. Ah, if only life and living were that simple, that easy! But I digress; I often do! Paul declares in words that would become a part of the traditional funeral liturgy, "If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united in a resurrection like his!" Whatever that reality was for Christ, so it shall be for us! Wonderful promise if Paul is correct, and our hope and prayer is that he is! Then Paul makes the statement that fuels this sermon, "this is what we know: the person that we used to be was crucified with him (with Christ) in order to get rid of the corpse that had been controlled by sin!" Yes, a corpse is a corpse, of course, of course! We are no longer slaves to sin, but are now free from its power, raised to new life and will never die again. Paul concludes our lection this morning by declaring, "in the same way, you also should consider yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus."

Well, it sounds good in the pulpit, and it looks good on paper, but as we all know, nothing that involves our human capacity can be that simple. After all, we are complex creatures, complicated creations! After all, we will read in a couple of weeks Paul's full confession, admitting that he does the thing he hates, and he fails to do thing that he should. Don't we all! We all resemble those remarks! After much detail, the apostle then confesses that he is "a miserable human being," yes, a psychotherapists' dream patient. Paul then, perhaps rhetorically, asks, in that reading, "who will deliver me from this dead corpse?" And of course, the answer is found in Jesus Christ as Lord! So, we have three weeks of Paul beating up himself and taking us down with him. But frankly, we know all this. **Even when we are at our best selves, we are fully, painfully, aware that we are prone to failure, as if programmed like robots to commit sins of omission and commission, making**

mistakes left and right, hurting one another, ourselves, and most definitely, our creator. No amount of religiosity or spirituality, no amount of self-loathing or condemnation, no amount of preaching and teaching, is going to vaccinate us from being fully human, and being fully human means that we sometimes, if not oftentimes, take a bite out of the proverbial apple, a metaphorical fruit described in the mythical story of Adam and Eve and the Serpent. So, knowing that we are going to be fully human, interestingly, intriguingly, if not ironically, a gift from God in itself, then how are we to live, how are we to manage the polarities of our existence, good, no very good, and sometimes behaving badly, yes very bad. We do not get do overs in this life! We are on a one-way street with a one-way ticket! Yes, we have regrets as we wistfully look in the rearview mirrors of our lives. Oh, if only I could have that one back! Oh, if only I could do things differently! Here's the deal, God expects for us to fail some of the time, because guess what, we are not God! God anticipates our difficulties, our struggles, yes, our failures that we call sin and tend to make bigger than any of them are, especially in the eyes of God. And that leads me to the poignancy of my preaching today.

That being said, there is a lot of evil in our world as there has always been. The wicked rage, to use a Psalmist image, when those who go out of their way engage in horrific behavior do so by intent and with motive. Human history has shown the vile side of our humanity, most frequently manifest in acts of terror and torture, oppression and persecution, prejudice and hatred, the atrocities leveled by one human being toward another, loathing the Godly differences within us all. Our history books are filled with division and conquest, arrogance and superiority, the belief that one person or group is better than another person or group. Herein is our dilemma! And with every conflict, every "special military operation," thank you Vladimir Putin, every war, every pious pronouncement using the Bible or whoever's holy book sufficing, we think we have assuaged something, that we have solved the problem, personally, communally, globally. When we approach any human dynamic, individually or corporately, with the idea that might makes right, we have not solved one thing and only exacerbate an already simmering and hostile reality, revealing our anger in the worst reactionary ways. **On this glorious day on which we celebrate PRIDE, humanity reflected in the colorful spectrum of a beautiful rainbow, yes, including but not limited to our**

LGBTQQIA+ community, we rejoice in the many ways that humanity has come to tear down walls and build bridges, and we weep over the countless ways humanity continues to distrust, despise, and destroy those segregated in the subconscious as the other. Folks, there is no other! To quote a song, “there is only you and me and we just disagree!” The Hebrew Bible implored the Israelites to welcome and shelter the alien, the foreigner, the stranger, in their midst, and I am certain that meant whoever and whosoever. Jesus went out of his way to encounter and engage every individual who looked nothing like him, the rabbi considered by anthropologists to be a diminutive five-foot, four-inch, brown to olive toned man, not the beauty-prized super model advocated in history’s artistic propagandized portraits. It is the sins of suspicion and hatred of those labeled, branded the other in this world, that is the communal cancer causing our own demise, our self-inflicted injury, the destruction of our very planet. Yes, we could count the ways all day long! But you and I already know them, and we know them well.

In a book, *Colors of Hope: A Devotional Journal from LGBTQ+ Christians*, editor Melissa Guthrie describes what colors of hope look like. She notes that pink is for sexuality in all its many forms, red is for life, orange for healing, yellow for sunlight, green for nature, turquoise for art and magic, blue for harmony and serenity, purple for Spirit, and when combined in the spectrum of the rainbow, God’s promise of peace once placed in the clouds, a reminder that we are all beautifully, fearfully and wonderfully, made, yes, in the image of our creator God.¹ Today there is so much vitriol swirling in society about the use of pronouns to describe who we are. Yes, everybody has at least one pronoun, and sometimes more, whether they accept it, whether they like it or not. Alysha Laperche explains, “Pronouns are used in everyday speech and writing to take the place of people’s names. We frequently use pronouns without thinking about them. Often, when speaking of someone in the third person, these pronouns imply a gender. These associations are not always accurate or helpful. Mistaking or assuming peoples’ pronouns mistakes their gender and sends a harmful message. Using someone’s correct gender pronouns is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their identity and your love for them.”²

¹Melissa Guthrie eds. *Colors of Hope: A Devotional Journal from LGBTQ+ Christians* (Chalice Press: St. Louis, MO, 2022).

²Ibid., xix-xx.

Laperche, who identifies as they/them asks a question that seems especially pertinent to our sermonic conversation today. She asks, “what does hope look like in our changing landscape? What color is hope? . . . How can we individually and collectively hope in color?”³ Against the backdrop of the reminder that the use of the rainbow PRIDE flag has been in vogue since 1978, Laperche declares, “hope is an act of resistance, challenging and dismantling systemic injustices that rob people of wholeness and wellness—that deprive us of hope. It resists the depression and despair that swirl within us and around us. To hope is to imagine and shape a new reality: a brighter future, a more just and inclusive world. The hope of our ancestors in the LGBTQ+ community carries us into the present moment . . . If it weren’t for those who came before us—their struggles, their witness, their hope—we would not be where we are today. In the United States, we have equal marriage rights, an out gay man ran for president (Pete Buttigieg is Secretary of Transportation in President Biden’s cabinet), and there are Pride parades on the streets of some of the most unexpected towns. But we are far from fulfilling our hopes for justice and equity. Still, we must recognize that we are living in the hope of those who came before us. It is now our turn to hope in color, imagining and shaping that just future where the expansive love of God is embodied in every aspect of life.”⁴ **It is this eloquent description of hope that I hope is the hope of our congregation as we make our mark, declare our witness, proclaim God’s prophetic word of hospitable welcome and inclusion, social justice in every aspect of human life, all the being and doing that makes us human, our humanity expressed in so many, myriad, ways, yes, inexpressibly so!**

When it comes to sin and sins, sinning and sinfulness, I am not sure exactly the serious violations that were on Paul’s mind, all of which he seemed to be so overly concerned. Paul seems to have been a tormented soul even after his conversion, liberation, and salvation, as he understood that idea, in Christ Jesus. Perhaps it all stemmed from his unnamed thorn in the flesh, a mystery ailment, whether it was emotional, mental, physical, or spiritual, that has stumped theologians and challenged the critically thinking and intellectually curious minds of biblical scholars for centuries. Who knows the source of any of his constant companion? What we do know is blatantly unvarnished evil when we see it,

³Ibid., 1.

⁴Ibid., 1-2.

human wickedness when we experience it. **Yes, sin is still a relevant theological conversation, a conundrum affecting all people of faith! It is real and it is rampant, but sin never amounts to, does not consist of, the small stuff we sweat daily, the little things, the minutiae on which we obsess and that haunts us, guilting and nagging at our souls like major stumbling block inhibiting, stifling, who we want to be. No, sin is grounded in the way we treat one another, any anger and bitterness, our distrust and suspicion, all prejudicial biases and bigotry that seem inherent to our being, everything that creates walls and destroys bridges, yes, the things that cause some of us to hate. There is the corpse! And it is past time, way overdue, that we bury the baggage in these bones, each and every one of them. A corpse should be a corpse, of course, of course! Not that you have asked, but my definition of sin is anything that compromises or damages our relationship to God, with others, and with our self. And sadly, these manifestations of hate are alive and well in the world, and happily evolving and mutating here in our own country in real time. I guess we should not be surprised, because as the early Church put today's Gospel quotes into Jesus' mouth, the fledgling movement understood that divisiveness would be the order of their day and no doubt for days to come, and that unfortunate reality has been proven so for more than two thousand years right up until this very moment. It is simply accepted as commonplace, normative, routine and ordinary. It is obvious that Christendom has always been and continues to be marked by a permanent schism, permanently split into micro pieces, divided by the bedrock beliefs on which we stand and have our being too polarized to ever find a middle. So be it! As they say in sports talk radio, "it is what it is!" I, **Tim Shirley, proudly he/him/his, will take to my grave the belief that when we welcome and include all people we are standing with Jesus. Yes, there is a right and wrong, there are those who are right and wrong. And those who willfully seek to alienate and differentiate, to separate and segregate, to categorize and minimize, to search and destroy. Their demonic mission will inevitably reveal that they are on the wrong side of history, yes, history will prove that pudding, sensibilities and sensitivity be damned. As Martin Luther once boldly and courageously, defiantly and proudly, proclaimed to those of pontifical religious authority, "Here I stand! I can do no other!" My hope and prayer is, that in offering these literally Lutheran reformation sentiments, that I speak a prophetic word for you as well. May this mantra be our testimony! In the final analysis our hope and prayer are in God, the one in****

whom we celebrate, and celebrating God demands from us that we celebrate each unique person creatively crafted in the divine image. In these divinely inspired words is the cliché reminder, the simple image, that God don't make junk, especially of wonderful variety of the humankind!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and longs for the day, a time in eternity, where we all will get it, that love is love, and that humanity will learn to love in every way that human beings have been blessed to love! Amen and amen.