

The Sting of Death is Sin

1 Cor 15:56-57

The second in a series of seven sermons on the cross for the season of Lent

If there's no problem, there's no need of a solution. If we look at Luther's statement, based on Paul: The cross alone is our theology, we see the solution is the cross. Then what's the problem?

A question that often comes up in confirmation is: What is the unforgiveable sin? Matthew 12:32: "Whoever says a word against the Son of man will be forgiven; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." This is like playing with fire. Could there be something God couldn't forgive? Wouldn't forgive? It is mentioned in Matthew 12:31-23, Mark 3:28-29, and Luke 12:10 (cp. Hebrews 4:2-6).

Today no one talks about the "unforgiveable sin." In fact, there is little talk of sin at all! The Roman Catholic Church is putting new emphasis on indulgences (doing something now to shorten the punishment for sin in purgatory). Many Catholic bishops have been calling for renewed emphasis on indulgences because many Catholics are no longer going to confession. The bishops have thought that by bringing back the gift of indulgences they might bring back some sense of the sinfulness of our condition.

But who talks about sin anymore? In the last twenty years or so there has been a lot of talk about victimhood, but what about sinfulness? There are three general ways people look at this.

First, it's all cultural and historical. There are those differences which depend on where you are. Differences among cultures. For example, in Japan people do not think about sin or talk about sin. They talk about "shame." This is a completely different conceptuality and Christian missionaries have had a very difficult time. How can you talk about the cross when the culture is based on shame and honor, and what people in that culture fear is appearing dishonorable?

What then is human nature? It used to be said that the Oedipus Complex, the struggle between the father and the male child, is intrinsic to human nature. But then it was discovered that this is just a problem in Western societies. There is no Oedipus Complex in the Orient. What then is human nature? What is basic?

A related question: What is taboo? In certain cultures there is that which is taboo, which has nothing to do with doing wrong or hurting somebody the way you and I think about it. It is simply that which you do not do.

Among us, because of relativism, we are basically committed to keeping up with the Joneses, whoever the Jones are in our world, our circle. That's how we sort things out. The way things are around us is what's right or wrong.

The second way has to do with psychology. In 1973 Karl Menninger wrote the book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* For Protestants sin had disappeared off the map because psychology had taken over. What Freud wrote about the id, ego, and super ego had nothing to do with sin.

Or another world-famous psychiatrist, Carl Jung, in his discussion of the correlates: Yin and Yang. There is nothing which can be called sin. There is nothing basically wrong with us; it's just a matter of getting correlated. Getting things in balance.

In psychiatry the real problem is basically that you're alienated. It is a problem in your own thinking or with others. But it is not sin.

Or sometimes, as with Kafka, the problem of human life is meaninglessness, but that is not sin.

The third way is philosophy. Philosophy, too, cannot deal with sin. Kierkegaard, in his book, *The Concept of Dread*, tries to talk philosophically about sin. At the end his whole attempt was unsuccessful. As a philosopher, there can be no real problem of sin. There is the problem of finitude. And there is the problem of the child as a blank slate one has to educate. But in philosophy there is no problem called sin.

Probably the most striking claim was made by one of the most renowned theologians of the Twentieth Century, Karl Barth. He wrote that evil is just the shadow side of the good. What this means is that there can't be anything that's really evil. Well, there has to be evil so there can be good, but it's not real evil.

Then what is the basic problem that the cross is dealing with?

In Luther's Small Catechism he talks about sin, death, and the power of the devil, but these are just words that do not mean much today. Sin has become trivial. Like the person who takes a second piece of chocolate cake, then slaps his hand and says, "Oh, I sinned."

Even death today is being minimized. No one is against grief counseling. But in our culture today the answer to death is often: Just get grief counseling. That's the end of it. The seriousness of sin and death is simply gone.

In Washington State, where church membership is very low when someone dies, family and friends gather in a secular funeral parlor and a family member, friend, or even a hired professional orator reads a eulogy and says nice things about the deceased.

For such people, sin is not serious. Death is natural. What comes next, nothing or something, it doesn't matter. They'll deal with it. Ho hum.

To the contrary, as Paul writes: "The sting of death is sin." (1 Cor 15:56a). That we die exposes us as sinners.

Not to speak of the Devil. We know that the first trick of the Devil is to convince you and me that he doesn't exist, and that we are like gods. Yet we die (cp. Hebrews 2:14).

Consider that famous scene from *Les Misérables* in which the peasant, Jean Valjean, is sentenced to five years in prison for stealing bread out of the bakery window for his starving family. Is that stealing, or what was it? Is it stealing that is less serious than other stealing?

We become confused because there is a difference between guilt and guilt. There is a difference between psychological guilt and theological guilt. Psychological guilt deals with feelings. On the one hand, we may feel guilty for something we shouldn't feel guilty about. On the other hand, we may not feel guilty for something that we perhaps should feel guilty about. This is the arena of psychological guilt. But the theological point of view has an entirely different basis.

Theological guilt involves the whole question of "judging." Matt 7:1 says: "Judge not, that you be not judged." Some say that means we should be tolerant because love means being tolerant above all. What Matt 7:1 is really about is the final judgment. A person's salvation. That's God's business. That's not for us to judge. Judge not about another person's salvation. That's God's business.

This issue of theological guilt is spelled out in 1 Cor 4:3-5 where Paul writes to his enemies:

"It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any other human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God."

The root of sin, the center of sin, the unforgiveable sin, if we want to use that term, is that we judge ourselves. It is really the same thing as in Genesis 3 about the sin that Adam and Eve committed, that we decide this is sin and that isn't sin. By judging we displace the Lord himself. It is only the Lord who judges. And how does he do that? His judgment is on the cross. That's entirely different. What we do when we judge ourselves is displace him and diminish the cross.

There are three basics which go with this:

First, it is the cross which tells us the seriousness of sin, death, and the devil. The solution had to be that God himself came and died. That tells us how serious are sin, death, and the power of the devil.

Second, he did it his way. We were not involved, and it was not our way.

And third, it is done (John 19:30).

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 15:56-57).

And this is why Luther writes, quoting Paul, that **the cross alone is our theology**. That is the basis of our hope and assurance. Thank the Lord. Amen