

“THOSE STUBBORN WAGES OF SIN,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 1, 2022

Congregation, in our own times an awful folks have gotten obsessed with extremes. Indeed, the very word “extreme,” which used to have highly negative connotations, has joined our popular vocabulary of superlatives. Consequently, we hear it now deployed in the context of extreme sports, extreme thrills, extreme luxury, and even extreme politics. And we consider it all good or at least copacetic. Although our own Christian faith has sometimes produced fanatics and extremists, Jesus—the center of our faith—counseled moderation in all things. He made only one exception to his rule of temperance and balance. Namely, with regard to sin.

As disciples of the risen Christ whose teachings are divinely validated by his very resurrection on Easter morn, how wise for us to keep to that singular exception! As this day’s gospel lesson from Matthew underscores, sin is truly worthy of some extreme measures. (*Matthew 5:17-30*)

Did you hear Jesus’ bold words as read just minutes ago? As recorded by Matthew, Jesus declares: “So if your right eye causes you to sin, take it out, and throw it away! It is better for you to lose a part of your body than to have your whole body thrown into hell. If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away! It is better for you to lose one of your limbs than to have your whole body go off to hell!” (*Matthew 5:29-30*)
Talk about radical surgery!

Jesus’ prescription reminds me of the boldness of outdoorsman Aron Ralston. Back in 2003, Alston, mountaineering alone in the Bluejohn Canyon in southeastern Utah, was pinned at the wrist under a fallen boulder. After five days he had to amputate his right forearm with a dull pocket-knife in order to break free and survive. He lost an arm but got away with his life, single-handedly rappelling down a 65-foot cliff, then hiking seven miles to civilization and medical care. Better for us too if we cut off sin and get a life!

Of course, what makes Jesus’ imagery in Matthew’s gospel seem even more extreme is the fact that today more folks than not are blasé or ho-hum about sin. In fact, all too many people are inclined to run towards sin, rather than away from it. On television, U-tube, and Facebook, as well as splattered through the print media still available at grocery store check-out counters, every manner of sinful and immoral behavior is paraded before our eyes. In a strange twist by older standards, the barest exercise of moral judgment in the face of outlandish behavior is now treated as if it is the worst sin of all, condemned out of hand as prudery and judgmentalism.

Our diminished capacity to call a sin a sin as we used to do has not gone completely unnoticed. Every so often there are men and women who speak up with concern about

the moral dumbing down of our society. Among them have been some pretty eminent psychologists and sociologists.

For example, the late, great psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a whole book that we might have expected some preacher and theologian to pen. It was surprisingly entitled, *Whatever Happened to Sin?* In it, Menninger expresses his concern about the evaporation of the whole concept of sin. It turns out that in his psychiatric practice Menninger was encountering more and more patients who were messed up because they didn't have a moral compass or a sense of boundaries to help them discern what was good and what was bad, and what was healthy versus unhealthy. Without moral guideposts, shaped by the sense that some things are sinful and destructive, it was tougher for these patients to get well. Menninger's clinical experience prompted him to call for a renewed appreciation of sin as an important moral and spiritual concept for us all.

Subsequently, the political sociologist Christopher Lasch took up the torch of concern with a book of his own. Entitled *The Culture of Narcissism*, Lasch's book observed that Americans are becoming so self-absorbed that they are losing or have already lost any sense of moral responsibility to others. Simultaneously compromised is the ability of all too many to distinguish between what is moral, immoral, and amoral.

Since Menninger and Lasch said what they did, the situation—at least in the United States—has only gotten worse and worsen. Most recently and interestingly, Church historian Martha G. Witten has studied the sermons of present-day ministers of all stripes but particularly those from evangelical Christian groups who used to make a condemnation of sin a staple of their preaching. However, more often than not, she found that they were now disposed to rationalize or explain away sin by blaming circumstances beyond individual control. Even tele-preachers and evangelists caught up in the most sordid scandals, which should have discredited them for good, were let off the hook by their flocks. Most tellingly, Witten entitled her timely book, *All is Forgiven*.

Now forgiveness is certainly a good thing. It's a direct moral mandate and commandment for us from Christ. (*Matthew 6:14-15, 18:21-22*) Yet not without sincere and genuine repentance and a willingness to accept consequences for our wrongdoing.

Congregation, if psychiatrists and sociologists are those most calling out sin, while Bible-thumping Christians have fallen quiet, if not silent, on the subject, what *is* the world coming to? Maybe, just maybe, these *are* the end times! Whatever the case, contrary to recent trends, we all need to take the reality of sin seriously for the sake of our well-being and the future of the world about us.

We owe our original concept of sin to our Jewish forebearers who with the leadership of Moses entered a covenant with the God most high at Mt. Sinai. That covenant is none other than the Ten Commandments. (*Exodus 20:2-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21*) For the Jewish community any violation of the Ten Commandments was a sin. It all started with the first commandment ban on idolatry: “You shall have no other gods before me.” (*Exodus 20:3*) But the Jewish community didn’t stop at the Mosaic Covenant in defining sin. On the basis of other instruction from God which they recorded in Old Testament books ranging from Proverbs to Deuteronomy and Leviticus, they embraced hundreds of more rules as guardrails against sin.

The Book of Proverbs, which provides one of our three scripture readings for this morning, is very explicit, if not eloquent, about what constitutes a sin in God eyes. In its sixth chapter we read that there are “six things which the Lord hates; seven which are an abomination to him.” Specified and condemned as sin are “haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to the evil, a false witness that breathes out lies, and a man who sows discord among brothers.” (*Proverbs 6:16-19*)

In his own ministry, Jesus did find the Books of Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Proverbs almost too complicated for folks like us in defining what is sinful and what is not. In fact, he saw men and women cleverly manipulating the letter of the religious law in order to evade moral responsibility and accountability for sin. Consequently, while insisting that he did not “come to do away with the Law of Moses or the teachings of the prophets,” Jesus sought to simplify God’s word so as to make it clearer for everybody what was sinful without any getting around it. (*Matthew 5:17*) Central for us to uphold in Jesus’ view is a love for God and a love for one another. (*Mark 10:17-31; Matthew 19:17-20; John 13:34; 1 John 4:7-12*) Any departure from this precipitates self-centeredness and selfishness and leads us into sin.

To help us navigate against sin, Jesus laid out what we have come to call the *Golden Rule*, which remains as golden and wise as ever. As Jesus expressed it: “Do for others what you want them to do for you.” Pointedly he affirmed: “This is the meaning of the Law of Moses and of the teachings for the prophets.” (*Matthew 7:12*) However, in our morning gospel lesson, Jesus adds that it isn’t just what we *do* that matters. No less important is the way we think and talk. Foul and impure thoughts and talk are sinful too. More than a mere outward conformity to moral law we should concern ourselves as his followers with a thorough-going transformation of heart and mind.

On this score, Jesus gives us two different scenarios to think about, involving anger and adultery. For instance, the Ten Commandments admonish us not to kill. (*Exodus 20:13*)

But Jesus warns us that angry, murderous, vengeful thoughts are also sinful and can impair our relationship with God. Yes, acting out in this case and actually taking a life is worse than thinking about it. Yet it's better altogether to forego anger in favor of forgiveness and reconciliation with our foes. (*Matthew 5:24-26*)

In a not dissimilar vein, Jesus goes beyond the Old Testament prohibition on adultery to warn us that even thinking and looking lustfully is a sin that needs to be recognized as sinful and kept in check. (*Exodus 20:14; Matthew 5:27-28*) Friends, don't imagine that you're morally superior if you just look and don't touch!

I think we all know that we cannot be perfect. Only Jesus stood blameless--as the Prophet John acknowledged in the moment before baptizing him in the waters of the River Jordan. (*Matthew 3:14*) But as God's children and Christ's disciples we are nevertheless called to walk as best we can in Jesus' footsteps, striving in God's grace to be as sinless and pure as we can be. Moreover, as Christians we have a responsibility to be a moral leaven for our entire society and world. If we, who know Christ and his example, don't resist sin, who will? We can and should be a beacon and light to others.

In the Middle Ages, a thousand years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, the Christian churches once more thought we needed to get more specific about sin for those too dense to absorb the full meaning of Jesus' direct and simple words. Consequently, the Christian churches put together a list of *Seven Deadly Sins*. Enumerated were wrath, greed, sloth (as in laziness), pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. That strikes me as a pretty good list of common human obsessions. As widespread and problematical as ever, each flows from self-centeredness and selfishness. Each compromises or obstructs our capacity to love God and love one another, which is what really matters. Yet perhaps the best part of that old list is its title which acknowledges these obsessions as sins--and *deadly* ones at that because they kill us spiritually. Yes, the wages and consequences of these sins, like all sin unchecked, really are stubborn and severe. How awful for our world then they become rampant as they now appear to be.

As Christian disciples, we each need to take sin seriously. And we need to combat sin faithfully in ourselves and in our society at large. Sin and the selfishness that gives rise to it should be a matter of public shame—not something we laugh off or treat lightly as if it is going to disappear if we ignore it. The quality of life for ourselves and our children and our children's children depends upon the moral scruples of us all and our willingness to keep sin and selfishness in check as much as possible as we live out lives faithful to Christ and his spirit. May we be an example to others by the supreme—if not extreme—efforts we make to be more loving and less self-centered and selfish, choosing right over wrong, not only in the way we act but even think and talk. **Amen.**