

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is a season the Church sets aside for confession and repentance. It's designed to make us more mindful of the approach of Easter, to help us experience more fully the joy of the new life we have in Jesus, the freedom we have from Sin and Death.

That means that during Lent, we have to talk about Sin. There can be no confession and repentance unless we're confessing something and repenting from something. If we're not being freed *from* anything then it's sort of silly to celebrate freedom.

But of course Sin is one of those topics that makes everyone nervous. Right now, everyone's squirming a little, wondering how to slip out before it gets too uncomfortable.

But here's the thing: we just spent six weeks talking about God's original intention for humanity. The life that we were created to have. And implicit in that discussion was the recognition that we *don't* have it right now.

We know there's something wrong with us, deep in our core. We know that so well that we don't need the Bible to tell us something's wrong. Every human culture in history has recognized that truth. Nearly every religion has some sort of "Fall" story, an understanding that the way we see the world right now isn't the way it's supposed to be.

Sure, we all disagree about why. But we agree on the what. There's a rot deep in the human heart. No wonder we don't like to talk about it. That rot is obviously unpleasant.

But it gets even worse when we try to discuss that sickness in a religious context. Because the Scriptures call that Rot Sin. And when we think Sin, we imagine that God gave us this list of rules. We even have the story - when Moses, God's prophet, climbed up Mt. Sinai and got the 10 Commandments, he brought them back down and now we know that if you want to be a good person, you have to follow those.

And because we have this list of what makes you a good person, the world gets divided into two kinds of people: the good and the bad.

You're either a law-keeper or a law-breaker. You either measure up to the list or you fail. The good people keep the list. And they become the police - they make sure everyone else is keeping the list. They single out a few of the sins on the list as especially bad, and if you do *those* sins, well. You're not welcomed. You stay out there in dark with the bad people, the lawbreakers. The sinners.

We good people, we law-keepers, we'll stay in here where God's approval is.

And if you're one of those outsiders? Well. You can get your act together, start behaving, clean yourself up, and then you can come in with all the good people.

Sound familiar? When religious people start talking about Sin, it's a short jaunt to judgment, condemnation, cliques and exclusiveness.

Here's the thing about this picture of Sin: it's exhausting. It's like we're all on this cosmic treadmill. This is Mike Mummert. He is part of the running connection group we have here, and Mike volunteered to help us illustrate how fruitless and exhausting living this way is.

If you're one of the law-keepers, then you're constantly running. Trying to keep up with working, earning, following those rules. Making sure you're doing all the right things, checking all the right boxes so you stay in God's favor.

Sinners are those people who couldn't keep up. You *fell* off the back of the treadmill. Maybe you couldn't keep up, you just got tired of trying to follow all the rules. Maybe you made a mistake, got tripped up. Maybe you didn't even know you were supposed to be running.

Whatever the case, you end up in a heap back here. And you wonder if you have the stamina, the energy to get back up and hop back on the treadmill. Dive back into the rules.

Both the sinners and the saints, the runners and the ones who fell down wonder, Isn't there something better than this? Is the life that God calls me to *really* supposed to be this exhausting, defeating, impossible journey? Am I really supposed to just run and run and run until I don't have anything left?

And the good news today is that there's a better answer than that. Yes, Sin is real. And yes, we need to take it seriously. But the best we can hope for is way, way better than this (the treadmill). And that's worth celebrating.

break for worship set, to conclude with Genesis 3 video

Watching Mike on the treadmill reminds us of the exhaustion that comes when we think of Sin as a list of rules we keep, a life of constant negotiations and checklists.

So the question we need to ask is: if that's not sin, then what is it? And the answer takes us back into Genesis. We spent six weeks in the first two chapters, exploring the world that God created. It's appropriate, then, that here at the beginning of Lent, we go to Genesis 3, to the story of how we lost it all.

That story is what we just saw: the man and woman that God created are walking in the garden when they come to a Tree in the middle of the garden. It's one of two special trees. The Tree of Life is over there, but here is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

And a snake tells them that if they choose this tree, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, then they'll be like God. So we should ask ourselves, How? How does the Knowledge of Good and Evil make us more like God?

Or a better question would be, since we chose that fruit, how are we now more like God than we were before? And why is that so bad?

Well: the word knowledge trips us up. Because we're children of a literate culture. When we hear knowledge we think Academic learning. The thing you get from going to school, sitting in a classroom and hearing someone talk about something.

So we think, Oh, the man and woman must have been naive before the Fall. They didn't have an academic understanding of the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. God kept them in a sort of childlike innocence.

But that's not what the text is trying to say. The ancient Hebrews were a preliterate culture. 95% or more of the culture couldn't read or write. So "knowledge" to them didn't have anything to do with a classroom. Knowing was something you gained from experiencing it. In fact, in Hebrew, you could use "knowing" someone as a euphemism for having sex. Older Bible translations preserve that - saying that "Abraham knew his wife" or something like that. The point is that the most intimate knowing you can have of another person is that intimate experience of them.

Knowing in the Bible isn't Academic understanding. It's hands-on, tangible experience.

God knew the difference between Good and Evil. We understand that from the first creation story - God orders the world. God gets in the middle of the chaotic mess and brings order, logic, a Way to it. God imposes the Way of life, the way of order, the way of right, on the wrongness of uncreated chaos.

And then God said, If you want life, follow my way. And that's played out very literally in Genesis 3. There is a Tree that represents Eternal Life, God's Way, the Right. And then there's another choice: a choice to reject God's Way. A choice to say, I want the experience of Right and Wrong. I want to call the shots. I want to be the creator, to impose my Way on the world. My Way, my logic, my sense of what's good and evil is better than God's.

Sin is choosing My Way, not God's Way. It's saying No to the Way God created you to live, the Way that leads to Life.

There is a Way that leads to life. An order, a logic that holds the world and our lives together. And when we follow that Way, we find life. When we don't, we end up in Death.

And what the Scriptures point out to us is something we all already know: We've all walked away from God. We've all chosen our own Ways.

That doesn't mean we're all monsters, that we're all Hitlers or bin Ladens. But the reality is that if we're not following God's Way, it doesn't matter how far off we are. Sure, some people in this world have chosen paths nearly diametrically opposed to God. They're about 180 degrees off. Clearly that person isn't heading towards life.

But what about the "good person" who basically makes right choices and has a good family? A person who would freely admit, Hey I'm only 10 degrees off!? 10 degrees off, followed long enough still takes you away from God. 1 degree off is still moving away from God. 1/2 a degree.

Anything that's not Life is still Death. It doesn't matter if you miss by an inch or a mile. By 180 degrees or just one. And who in here would say they follow God's way perfectly?!

When we talk about Sin, this is the terrible reality we *must* face. We are all trapped in Sin because we all have chosen to go our own way rather than God's way. And now our souls are bent away from God.

Not because we don't keep a list of rules. In fact, the "rules" God gave us are meant to be a lifeline, not a condemnation. Even though we all turned away from God, God didn't abandon us. God gave us The Way and then God *became* The Way in the person of Jesus.

This is what we misunderstand about the Scriptures. We focus on the outward, on following the rules, doing the right things. We try to fix the surface stuff, what everyone can see, our behaviors. But we don't address the deeper problem: our behaviors are only symptoms of the bent of our hearts.

Those sinful behaviors are actually an outgrowth of that fundamental bent nature of our hearts. In Matthew 12, Jesus is talking to a group of religious leaders. They were the insiders, the ones who kept all the rules and looked down on those who couldn't. Here's what he told them:

A tree is identified by its fruit. If a tree is good, its fruit will be good. If a tree is bad, its fruit will be bad. You brood of snakes! How could evil men like you speak what is good and right? For whatever is in your heart determines what you say. A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart. -- Matthew 12:33-35 (NLT)

It's what's in your heart that determines what comes out of your mouth. Your actions, the good and bad things we do? Those are just the *fruit*. What they are, what we do, how we speak and act, all that only reveals the true condition of our hearts.

And if your heart is bent away from God, it doesn't matter how much "good stuff" you do. Later in Matthew, Jesus told another group of religious leaders - more insiders that:

What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! For you are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy-- full of greed and self-indulgence! You blind Pharisee! First wash the inside of the cup and the dish, and then the outside will become clean, too.

...You are like whitewashed tombs-- beautiful on the outside but filled on the inside with dead people's bones and all sorts of impurity. Outwardly you look like righteous people, but inwardly your hearts are filled with hypocrisy and lawlessness." Mat 23:25-28 (NLT)

Could you imagine if you went over to someone's house, they offered you a drink (because they're considerate hosts) and then they reach for a cup that's got some old soda in it?

They start to pour you a drink and you make a face so they say, Oh how silly of me. Let me wash this for you. So they run a rag over the outside of the cup but never clean the inside?

Would you drink out of it? *Of course not*. It wouldn't matter how long they spent polishing the outside of the cup. If they didn't clean the inside, the drink is still bad.

So too with us. At our most fundamental level, we are bent away from God. When we reduce Sin to a list of things not to do, when holiness is a bunch of check boxes, we miss the real danger of Sin altogether. Our foundation is rotted, so everything built on it is crooked. And we can try to prop the building up all we want, but it doesn't fix the problem. We just end up exhausted.

Like we're running and running and running. Expending all this effort, but never actually *going* anywhere. We're never transformed. We don't stop to address the core of our being, the basic bent away from God. Instead, we just try to be better people, try to do more good than bad. Try to say nice things and cuss less.

The answer isn't "try harder". If we don't stop and get real about the condition of the innermost part of ourselves, our heart and soul, that place where we're bent away from God, none of that matters. We'll just be sinners running running running. Trying to keep up. Getting more and more tired. Headed for spiritual exhaustion. Spiritual burnout.

SO what do we do? Well, first, here's what we don't do: Don't make excuses for your failures. Don't say, Well I'm only human. What do you expect? You know what they say - to err is human.

No! We weren't created for Sin. Sin does not have to be what defines our lives! God created us. God told us the Way to life. God became one of us to *show* us the way to Life.

We choose to go our own ways. But that makes us *less* human. Ever step you make into Sin, into all those ways that lead away from God are steps *away* from life. Away from the person you were created to be. The paths of Sin lead *away* from your truest Self.

Today, we just need to acknowledge this. We all have chosen our own ways. We all have sinned. And our choices lead to death.

No amount of trying can change that. If you're bent away from God – even by just a degree – then you're moving away from life, towards Death. No amount of Good "makes up" for Bad. Morality isn't a scale you try to keep balanced. Just cleaning the outside of the glass isn't enough.

So stop. Stop running, stop trying. Stop relying on how holy you can act, or beating yourself up for not being good enough. Shut down the treadmill. Quit trying to be better, to live by a set of rules, to make yourself good enough for God through your own efforts. You can't. You just end up burnt out, exhausted or despairing.

That's not the way.

Communion SetUp

So what is the way? How do we reconnect with God? Get back on the right Path? Well that is what we'll be exploring throughout the rest of Lent. And each week during Lent, we will conclude our gathering with the Communion Meal.

The Communion Meal represents Jesus' death. And it's Jesus' Death that rescues us from Sin. That's the good news. That's why a whole series on the reality of Sin is actually going to be really, really good. Because when we talk about the reality of Sin, the terrible power of Sin, we also get to talk about the better reality of Jesus' love. Of the greater power of God.

The Cross is proof that God's love is stronger than our pride. We come to this table to remember Jesus' death, to celebrate the freedom we find on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection.

When we eat the wafer, we remember that Jesus' body was broken for our sin. He received the death that we chose with our sin.

When we dip it in the grape juice, we remember that Jesus' blood was poured out to restore us to God. That his death healed the broken relationship that started clear back in the garden.

You do not have to be a member of Beaver Creek Nazarene to receive Jesus' Communion Meal. Jesus offers his body and blood to anyone who craves freedom from their sin, freedom from the endless efforts of trying to be good enough.

So if that's you, if you're sick of trying on your own, if you're hungry for the freedom that comes with letting God rescue you, then you are invited to God's table. And after you receive the meal, you will also receive a card with a verse printed on it. Take it with you and hold onto it.

Prayer

Benediction

Bulletin & After Party

Memory verse:

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (NLT)