

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

How to Be a Sinner

Luke 15.11-32

March 27, 2022

Each of our readings this morning, from Psalm 32, 2 Corinthians, and Luke's gospel speak powerfully to something core to our identity, and our faith. The readings this morning are a celebration of forgiveness. And goodness knows, we need a lot more of forgiveness, forgiveness given and forgiveness received.

It could be said that all Christian worship is a celebration of forgiveness. Sometimes it seems that some people get the impression that when Christians get together, they are celebrating their collective self-assurance that they are not like those other people who need forgiveness. Maybe that's true somewhere—a group of people who delight in pointing their fingers at other people, but I have to say, I've not met very many in church life who are authentically like that. The people I've met along the way are more likely to be people who know they have been in great need of grace and people who are working awfully hard to extend grace to those who have genuinely hurt them. They come to worship to confess again and again the power of the prayer: *forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

"Forgiveness may be the greatest power in our lives" (Beth Tanner) For a long time I counseled couples that keys to a happy marriage hinged on being clear about four questions: How will you handle money? How will you nurture physical intimacy? How will you grow and express your faith? How will you parent children and relate to your families? I've long since added a fifth: How will you give and receive forgiveness? Forgiveness is the key to everything in relationship. It's the power source. Today is a celebration of forgiveness.

Psalm 32 begins with celebration. "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." The biblical image of covering that I like the most is that this is the same word used to describe the flood waters that covered the earth. Imagine sin being covered by the waters that washed them clean.

The word translated blessed or happy is *esher* which means more than a feeling you have. It's a condition of life. The way of life of the forgiven is a life of gratitude and freedom. In Paul's words, it is the life of being a new creation. That powerful.

We notice already, even from the first line that to talk about forgiveness, to seek it and receive it, celebrate it and live in it, we're going to have to talk about and acknowledge something else, another truth. It's not an accident or a mistake or an error in judgment or a recent unpleasantness or a personality defect. It's sin. We have to talk about sin. Which means we have to talk about ourselves as sinners.

There's some danger in self-identifying as a sinner. And a lot of people shy away from it; they run away from it. The language of sin can be maudlin or masochistic, usually depending on how many syllables you put in the word. It can perpetuate self-harm; it can be a gateway to some pretty warped theologies of our absolute depravity denying God's declaration that his creation is good. It can also be grounds for excuse making, saying something like, "well, I'm a sinner, so might as well give in to my desires and temptations because that's who I am." Which in turn can lead to toxic levels of guilt and shame.

So, there's lots of reasons we might want to steer clear. It's certainly not in fashion to say anything about anyone being a sinner, even myself. We are part of a society whose chief aim is to protect personal liberty, which means freedom to do what one wants to do when one wants to do it. In such a moral context, it means that what you want to do is valued as your personal choice which no one can or should impede, and certainly not label as something like "sin." And in Christian worship, the whole idea of confessing sin has fallen out of favor because it makes us feel bad, and worship in some settings has become a relentless pursuit of happy emotions with no room for confession and certainly no room for the season of Lent.

Besides all this, talking about sin and people as sinners is just so... judge-y.

All of these are reasons to avoid the subject. Indeed, I can only think of one good reason why we should talk about sin and name ourselves as sinners: because it is the path to freedom. It is not the path to grace. You already have grace. It is the path to living in the grace you have already been given. It is not the path to love. You are already beloved. It is the path to living freely in delight of divine love. This is the way, as they say.

I have a book I've been reading about sin. No, not that kind of book. It's a *theological* book about sin. I don't remember why I bought it. I must have read about it somewhere, but it seemed like the kind of book you would read in the season of Lent, so I bought it and have been reading it. It's sat on my table in my office. Sometime recently a group was gathered in my office for a meeting. During the meeting I noticed the person sitting in the chair next to the table looked down and did a double take at the book cover and its title, *How to Be a Sinner*. I don't know if the person wondered if a pastor should be reading such a book, or thought to himself that I clearly didn't need such an instruction manual in something I've so obviously mastered, but it was an interesting moment from across the room to watch unfold. *How to be a Sinner*. The title catches your attention.

It reminds me of a similar situation years ago when our kids were little. After church they and some of their friends, some of your kids, would play in my office, especially in the little closet in my office. They would play Harry Potter school. I went in there one day looking for something and found a three-ring binder with a title page written in children's handwriting on the cover, "Defense of the Dark Arts". I only assume this was one of your children who did this. I thought, oh boy, in some other church somewhere in America, if a deacon wandered in here and saw that book, the pastor would have some 'splainin' to do. Defense of the Dark Arts.

How to be a Sinner . . . that probably deserves some 'splaining, too. Truth be told, it's not an instruction manual on how to do wrong things, as if any of us needs such a book. I heard someone once say that the Lord's prayer should say, "And lead me not into temptation, I can do that just fine on my own, thank you."

How to be a Sinner isn't about how to do wrong things; it's about how to understand spiritually why we do should be named sin and what it means theologically to name ourselves as sinners. To get to the point, understanding what we do as accidents or mistakes only leads to guilt, shame, and defensiveness with nowhere to go with it. Understanding what we do as sin opens up the world of confession, repentance, absolution, forgiveness, and freedom. In the words of the psalm, blessedness. This is how we tell the truth about ourselves and embrace the truth of ourselves. Which in turn, opens to us the world of divine grace, which knows no bounds in its relentless pursuit and human grace, which is often costly, all from which flows the blessing, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."

Can you imagine any better picture of this than the prodigal son? In Jesus' parable he is the epitome of someone who just does everything wrong. When he says to his father he wants his inheritance now, it's as if he's saying, "you're as good as dead to me." When he leaves the farm, he's leaving whatever responsibilities he was supposed to have to others who have to shoulder their work and his, too, mostly his older brother whose resentment is understandable. He goes to a far country, in other words not God's country. He 'squandered his property in dissolute living." It's left to our imaginations to picture how he spent the fortune he had. When the money was all gone, he finds himself in the condition The Zach Brown Band sings about, "The senioritas no care-o when there's no dinero." All alone in a distant land, with nothing to eat and nowhere to live and no one who cares for him, he takes the only job he can find, slopping another man's pigs. It's a story of downward mobility, like a death spiral to rock bottom.

If there was ever one, this guy's a sinner, right? Sure, but he doesn't know it quite yet. Maybe to this point he thinks of himself as a victim of his father's unreasonable expectations or an unlucky fellow who just happened to make some bad bets or someone who has so grievously insulted and demeaned his core relationships that there's no way back home.

To be sure you don't have to be like this guy to be a sinner. That's what we sometimes think though, basically decent people think, "Surely, I'm not that bad; there's lots of people worse than me." That's what we think sometimes.

But other times, for some people, the thought is: "No one has ever been worse than me. I've done terrible, shameful things." We're all somewhere in the pull of those twin lies: I am not in need of forgiveness, and I'm not worthy of love and forgiveness.

What I want to say to you is this: learn how to be a sinner. A sinner is someone who has the capacity to see and tell the truth about themselves. This takes a great deal of trust. One particular church father (Fr. Sophony) gave a great deal of wise thought to this. He said, "True contemplation begins the moment we become aware of sin in us." And I want to point out that

he doesn't say true contemplation begins the moment we *have eradicated* all the sin from within us. His spiritual wisdom is that true contemplation, which means dwelling in the love of God, true contemplation begins the moment we become aware of sin in us.

He goes on, "To apprehend sin in oneself is a spiritual act, impossible without grace, without the drawing near to us of Divine Light." To be aware of our sin is to begin to acknowledge and tell the truth of ourselves. To be a sinner is to see this truth, and then it is to tell this truth to ourselves and to God and sometimes, to other people in our lives. Confession is truth telling in trust that even if we tell the truth of ourselves, we are still capable of being loved. This is faith.

And it's not always easy.

In Psalm 32, the psalmist describes how long and how deeply he tried to keep from facing this truth. He describes it as being silent, not the sacred silence of prayer, but the silence of non-truth-telling.

*My bones wasted away, my groaning all day long;
your hand was heavy on me day and night;
my strength was dried up like a hot summer drought.*

Even then confessing wasn't easy. In verse 5, it takes three lines to get to it:

*I acknowledged my sin to you
I did not cover my iniquity
I said, "I will confess my transgression to the Lord."*

The younger son lives this out. As the story goes, *he comes to himself*, he comes to his senses. What am I doing here? Let me go home and try to hire myself out to my Father. As he trudges home, he rehearses his speech, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like a hired hand."

In the psalm confession takes three lines, but forgiveness only takes 1:

And you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

The Son rehearses his lines all the way home, but his Father sees him coming, runs to him, interrupts his speech, embraces him, welcomes him home as his child who was lost and now is found, was dead but now is alive. The Father shows us how to offer grace. The son shows us how to be a sinner, not in all he did so very wrong, but in what he did when he came to himself. He faced and told the truth, he went home, he received what was given him far beyond anything he could have possibly deserved.

If the prodigal son story is the picture of forgiveness and grace, 2 Corinthians 5 is the heart of the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. It's a summary of everything else:

*If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.
Everything old is passed away, everything is made new.
All this is from God.*

That's it. That's the Gospel. Because of that, we have been given the ministry of reconciliation, in the name of Jesus Christ through whom God is reconciling the whole world. We who are made new in Christ are ambassadors for God's never-ending love, God's never-exhausted grace, and the freedom that comes as the blessing of being forgiven.

In the psalm, the forgiven sinner is not in need of being lectured but becomes the teacher of all others. This is his life-giving message:

*Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but unfailing love surrounds the one who trusts in the Lord.*

May you be free this day, free to live in grace, to trust in the arms that hold you, to walk in the blessedness of your salvation, and to be ministers of reconciliation with all that is broken and in need of deep healing in these days.

In these moments of silence now, may the Holy Spirit speak to your heart just the words that you need to hear this day. May those words be words of truth and of life and hope, and may you have ears to hear the words of grace that God pours down upon you, floods you with until that grace covers your whole world.

Amen.

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