

“Of straining out gnats and swallowing camels”

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Toronto United Mennonite Church

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Read selections from Matthew 23

Stop it. I know what you're thinking, and stop it. That text that Doreen just read from Matthew 23 is just a bit delicious, isn't it? Truly, there's something incredibly satisfying about witnessing a bunch of self-righteous people get a smack-down. “Hypocrites” “You brood of vipers” Tell me you're not sitting there thinking of just the person who fits the bill.

Sin is delicious. Forbidden, salacious, juicy, ..... especially when someone else does it. There's something gratifying about parsing out someone else's sin, combing over it in fine detail, deciding just where that other person went wrong, what he should probably have done differently, observing over our noses and with sage nods of our heads the consequences of her choices. There's something delightful about being in the right when another is in the wrong.

Sin can also be pleasurable when we do it and nobody knows about it.

Less pleasant when they do.

But someone else's sin, now that's something to mull over. Like an accident scene, you just can't look away.

"They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen by others; they clean the outside of the cup but the inside is filth." Turns out I fit the bill as much as anybody, maybe you do too. So stop it.

The narrative about sin begins soon into the biblical story about the beginning of everything, and the plot thickens quickly. (Much of this analysis comes from a Brief History of Sin, a lecture I heard given by theologian Paul Cumin in 2011). God creates the world and everything in it is good. God makes humankind in God's own likeness, and so in the image of God they were created. A story that begins in goodness and beauty quickly takes a turn, however, because apparently it wasn't good enough to simply be made in God's image. By the second account of the creation story, a serpent is already trading on God's likeness, peddling a counterfeit knowledge that he says will make them even more "like God."

And so the desire to be like God is the root of sin. The irony, writes Cumin, and the tragedy, is that in this attempt to grasp at godliness, we demonstrate ourselves to be exactly unlike God. It turns out that God is not a grasping God but a giving God.

Il Cumin asks the question - did God actually come into the world or did God only appear to do so? His point is this: If God remains above and autonomous from the history of the world, and has only appeared to be in the world then revelation is only about information, transferred to us from God. And so the nature of sin becomes, "God said not to do such-and-such." If, however, God is actually and truly revealed as creator of the universe, in Jesus, through the spirit, - if Jesus is truly God-in-the-world, if God is truly incarnate, then we discover God, not through information, but through relationship. The three-in-one stuff, as Jeff brilliantly described it, is inherently relational.

Says Cumin, "this God participates openly in relations of love so perfect that those relations are God's very being. That is the God we were created to be like and so we too have our being in relation. Like God, we do not first

exist and then begin various relationships; the order is the other way round. We have relationships with others and thereby exist.

He gives the example of the death of a loved one. If I, standing here, were to receive word that my spouse had passed away, the person I was in the minute before I knew, and the person I would be in the moments after would be forever changed. To varying degrees, the same is true of all of our relationships. As created beings made in God's image, we are intentionally and integrally composed of our relationships with others.

Martin Luther was likely drawing from Augustine when he said: "Due to original sin, our nature is so curved in upon itself at its deepest levels that it not only bends the best gifts of God toward itself...but...in this wicked way, it seeks everything, including God, only for itself."

And so we arrive at my best definition of what sin actually is: While we have been created to be in relationship, to live open to and for others, sin is the curving in on oneself, away from God, away from relationship. Cumin quotes Colin Gunton: "When individual self-contemplation becomes the basis of the self, rather than the relation to the divine and human others on

which our reality

actually depends, the self begins to disappear.”

So to simplify, sin is not about what kind of person we will be, but whether we will be a person at all.

So in this way, sin is about more than checklists - you know the ones.

Column A is Good and Column B is bad. As long as most of my checkmarks fall in column A I can feel pretty good about myself as a Christian. The lists also enable me to crane my neck and look over at your list, and cluck my tongue and shake my head when your lists have more checkmarks in Column B. Probably I should also mention to you that you shouldn't have so many check marks in Column B, then I would get an extra check mark in my Column A. I jest. But not really.-

Sin is one of those words that isn't just a finite noun; because it is implicitly a relational concept, it is something that *does* something. It *functions*, in particular to undermine relationship - with God, with other people, with the earth. I'm going to go out on a limb here and say out loud that there's nothing wrong with playing cards, though in my early years they were

*verboden*. I once had a professor who was a Jewish Rabbi, who defined sin as anything that undermines the dignity of another. I think he's onto something.

This week Dora and I been traveling a rough road with a loved one who is coming to the end of an agonizing week of drug detox. As a child I knew that putting harmful substances into my body was wrong, sinful. Our bodies are a temple, and as such we need to honour God with our bodies. Fair enough. But look more deeply and ask, where and at what points was dignity undermined? who sinned? Drug use is now widely understood to be associated with trauma, particularly from childhood. I read an interview on CBC where a doctor said he had never met with a woman suffering from addiction who had not suffered sexual abuse; he had never met a man in addiction who had not experienced abandonment or abuse as a child. Who sinned? What about the pharmaceutical companies who found a way to pedal refined heroin as oxycontin as a miracle painkiller without fully disclosing its highly addictive nature? What motive could there have been other than personal profit? What about the doctors who received kickbacks for every oxy prescription they gave out? Now they're dialing back the prescriptions and clamping down on oxycontin, so a cheaper and more

lethal street drug fentanyl is surging to take its place. This week we have seen the face of addiction, and it's the face of desperation. When fentanyl is your only option to stave off unbelievable withdrawal symptoms, let me tell you, you take fentanyl. So tell me, who sinned?

I don't know if you noticed, but Jesus never once required repentance from any of the unsavoury characters he encountered. Not from the Samaritan woman whose husbands had been many, not from the tax collectors with whom he broke bread, not even the criminal beside whom he hung on the cross. "Today you will be with me in paradise," he said, no questions asked. These tended to see Jesus, really see him. To *recognize* Jesus, to know him for who he was, because he looked kindly on them, and saw their humanity. Often, maybe almost always, a joyful and spontaneous turning often occurred, but it wasn't because Jesus reminded them of their sin. Think of Zacchaeus - he gave what he had to the poor, not because Jesus berated him for his cheating and thieving, but because Jesus had smiled on him.

Jeff, in his sermon on "God" a couple of weeks ago, said the essence of God is compassion, and as for Jesus, as Marilyn said two weeks ago, as

God-in-the-world, Jesus taught and preached and healed and lived compassion, day in and day out, in a tiny plot of geography between the east end of the Mediterranean and the Jordan River. In that small space, Jesus' tool was compassion, person by person. And his followers are called to do likewise.

And so when it comes to sin, our task is simply to love each other with no strings attached, to be the wings of the mother hen sheltering and protecting the most vulnerable among us, listening carefully to each other with compassion and kindness, without assessing each others' score cards. And then to attend to ourselves. And when we attend, we did it not just with regard to the jot and tittle of the checkmark on the list, but also, perhaps especially to the ways in which we have not honoured the dignity of another, have not received another in love, have participated in systems or institutions that have served to undermine the dignity of our brothers and sisters, even by our silence. And we attend to ourselves not because we have been judged and found guilty ourselves, but have found ourselves looking into the loving face of Christ, and cannot do otherwise.



