

Gospel-y Law Romans 3:19-28; John 8:31-36 - Reformation Sunday

Slide: Sin

Sin. When I say that word out loud, what comes to your mind? Do any images come into view for you?

Sin. I think that word packs a punch. It even sounds like a bad word. And, when you add the word “sinner” to the mix, it sounds even worse. Even when looking the word up on a simple Google search, the first meaning of the word is:

An immoral act against Divine Law.

Really? If that is what sin is defined as, I wouldn't want to be associated with the word either. Look, let's just face it. The word sin isn't so popular, at least in the feel good culture. Even when we use it in worship or say it about ourselves, I get the impression that we are uncomfortable with it, like it's ok to say it in worship, but out there? Can't we just say we make mistakes? Isn't that enough? Today, no one likes to use the word, at least in the public forum or in our culture, because when push comes to shove, we have come to confuse sin with:

Slide: Immorality

Immorality

Now, immorality; that is, when we do something that is wrong from right, something that is evil instead of good, we tend to attribute that behavior to things like murder, adultery, stealing – you know, the big Ten Commandments. And, while as God does give us those Commandments to keep and it is immoral to break them, that's not what sin is, not fully. And yet, we have come to believe that is what sin is – right from wrong, morality, morality, etc. Now, is it true that we sin when we do these immoral things? Sure. But, that's not what sin is. It might be strange to say this, but the word sin I think has gotten a bad rap...and here is why.

Slide: Martin Luther Is...

Today is Reformation Sunday, that day we wear our best red, sing the big Lutheran hymns, and pat ourselves on the back for all that reforming we did 500 years ago because of a monk named Martin Luther. And, while as I'm not saying Martin Luther messed up the use of the word sin, I will say that the Protestant Church along the way has not helped with the notion, especially as the Protestant movement took hold in Europe and then here in the United States. Our Puritanical roots here especially in this country has led to an odd view of what sin is, as if by saying that people are sinners, we are saying they are bad people, immoral people.

And yet, that protesting, sometimes crude monk Martin Luther is the one we really do have to thank for reminding us of what the Biblical view of sin is, something that had even been lost in his day. And, what did he help the people of his day understand sin really to be? Well, we have a little help today from Paul, too, the reading from Romans:

Slide: "Since all..."

"For no human being will be justified in God's sight by deed prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin...since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift."

Slide: Blank

Now, before we jump to the grace part and that the grace of God is a free gift for all of us poor sinners, let's remind ourselves of what sin really is and why the law of God is really necessary for us to even have the gift of grace in the first place. Of all people, Martin Luther spoke of sin in a way that makes real sense. And although he lived 500 years ago and his language is pretty medieval in usage, the concept is still pretty contemporary – that sin is bigger than simple immoral acts and deeds. Sin is something deeper, something more intrinsic in the human condition, that whenever we humans bend in upon ourselves; that is we turn in upon our own desires, needs and wants, to

the point that we forget the good of the neighbor and the purposes of God, we fall short.

Slide: Me, me, me

So, sin isn't so much the act of lying or cheating – it's forgetting that lying or cheating hurts other people as well as the self, and it attempts to play God over others. Sin is "missing the mark." Sin simply is selfishness – my will verses the will of the one next to me and to God's will for me.

And, Luther understood this better than anybody. He understood that there was this immense gap between what we should be verses what we are and that no matter how hard we work, jump, or strive towards bridging that gap, we never, ever will make it. He knew just how flawed he was because early on as a monk, he kept trying to bridge that gap as most people were encouraged to do that.

Why? Well, the church of that day confused the law with the Gospel. The powerful church leadership of that day tended to think that because of the sacrifice of Jesus, you should be able to muster enough good works to be better and better until you were closer to closing that gap to reach the goodness of Jesus, too. Along the way, those in the medieval church forgot what the Bible actually said about Jesus' sacrifice and what sin actually was. This way of thinking practically broke Martin Luther to the point that he thought God had rigged it for him to fail.

It was only when Luther opened the Bible, studied scripture, actually learned what the actual Greek scripture said, and having read for the very first time in his life (remember he was already a monk and yet had never read the Bible), that what the apostle Paul wrote these words in the book of Romans, that Luther found the whole purpose of having God's law in the first place, that is the being, the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment of loving God and loving the neighbor as yourself, was so that he could see that a gap was there. The gap simply reveals one thing: the need for the Gospel – Luther heard for the first time in his life that he was saved from trying to save himself because of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Slide: Mind the Gap

Like Luther, down deep, we know it, too. We know that gap is there, especially on those days when we deny it is, when we think we are better than others, when we think we are just fine, or when we have the worst day of shame, discomfort or difficulty ever. We know that gap is there and we just might rail against God that it's rigged as well. The law of God shines in our faces brightly and brilliantly to remind us that that gap is there. We know the gap is there because we always try to fix it ourselves and never can.

I like how the famous tattooed swearing pastor Nadia Boltz Weber put it in an essay called *"Why the Gospel is more Wizard of Oz-y"* when she said the following about the law and sin:

"It looks like every feminist who in secret hates her body and every televangelist who's really addicted to porn and every social worker who doesn't actually look into the eyes of the homeless man they pass every day on the corner. They all know what the law can do to us. How cruel the distance between our ideal self and our actual self can feel. And that feeling of not ever really hitting the mark, whatever mark that is, is the feeling of God's Law convicting you."

Slide: Law Gospel

And convict us the law does, even when we want to excuse sin as only those real immoral acts that we or others occasionally do. So, as Pastor Nadia said, and as Martin Luther said, and as the Apostle Paul said, we all fall short of God's glory and that's the simple definition of sin – all of us are that way, because we are not God and we never will be. That does not make us bad. It just means we're human and we need a loving God to bridge the gap of being what we naturally are. We cannot ever attain that gap to God and why would we want to when we have Jesus to do it for us?

This means that the Gospel means –oh- so much more when we recognize that gap in our lives. And, in order to recognize it, we have to have the law there to convict us daily. It's the law itself, the putting that gap into perspective, that we are even able to hear the Gospel for our lives. For,

without the law to convict us, we wouldn't see how free the gift of the Gospel is and how freeing it is for when we can't bridge the gap, and there are days when it is painful how far away that gap is. The Good News is - Christ has bridged it for us.

As Jesus puts it in the Gospel reading today, "So if the son makes you free, you are free indeed." That freedom of a Christian comes with a price, the price paid by Jesus, knowing that the gap can never be bridged by us. It can only be bridged by his death and resurrection. This thankfully releases us from having to continually strive to save ourselves.

Does that mean we can sin all we want? Well, of course not. Paul says that a lot in his letters, too! But, it does help us know that despite our sin, despite the law that shows our sin, we have an advocate in the person of Jesus. So that use of the word "sin", that is never going away as long as you come to St. John's. We use that word here and we admit we are sinful because without that law to show that we can't bridge the gap ourselves, we can't see the amazing gift the Gospel is.

That Gospel is everything to us, but we need the law to better put it into context. Call it a "Gospel-y" law if you want to (and yes, I just made a word up) for as long as the law is there to show us our need to be freed from sin and death by that free gift of grace through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, than we will continue to confess and receive absolution almost every week.

And, let's face it, sometimes our confession is the only time during the week we may tell the truth about ourselves. That truth we tell brings us back to the Gospel – for if the Son makes you free from sin and the law – than you are free indeed.

***Slide: The Gospel Frees...
(Leave up final slide until hymn begins)***

Thanks be to God. Amen.