

Last Sunday, when it was just about ZERO OUTSIDE, a number of hearty souls came through the cold to hear the beginning of something. It continues today. Probably a month ago Jill asked me out of the blue, “What is Sin?” The question led to an idea that this is something that should be talked about in a sermon. So last Sunday it began. Last Sunday I mentioned a problem about the whole topic: people seem to have very different lists as to what these sins actually are. For some people, having long hair is a sin; dancing, playing cards, going to the movies, smoking or drinking alcoholic drinks, mowing your grass on Sunday. I have been told for much of my life that listening to rock music is a sin! What has been odd to me is that the people talking about these things being sins usually never mention things like hating someone else for the color of their skin, or their religion, or because someone is poor. This whole thing has to be more than just a list of bad actions. What is a sin? And why is something actually a sin? I want to provide you with some tools so that you can figure out what this is all about.

Our Scripture lesson for today is still from Genesis, just like last week, but this time it is from earlier. This time it actually is talking about the creation of US, *human beings*. By the way, the word “human” in ancient Hebrew is “Adam,” which we end up thinking is just a guy’s name. But Adam is us. We are filled with DAM, which makes us live. Dam is blood. And we are Adam because we are created out of Adamah, which is the soil. All these words are connected (more about this in a few minutes in Genesis 2). We are made from the soil, and we are filled with magic red liquid that keeps us living. But there is something else that is so special about who and what we are. We should have a little slide up on the screen that gives us two ancient words, this time in Latin. **Imago Dei**. What is this? It means “in the image of God.” What are we? According to our sacred

writings, we are made Imago Dei. Does this mean we look like God? Hard to tell. But maybe it wants us to understand that we have been created by this Being in order to copy the ways of the Creator.

For at least 1800 years, the leaders of the Church have had the idea that human beings are created in the Image of God, and that has ultimate meaning. But in the next chapter it goes even deeper, in a more intimate way. In Genesis 2 the LORD God makes “Adam” out of adamah, like someone working with play-dough or something (that is my first play-dough reference in almost 37 years of preaching!). And then we are told that the LORD God “...blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and Adam became a living being.” Nothing else that is alive has this happen. Only us. Only us.

You might be asking “Hey, I thought we were going to hear about the nature of Sin! Why are we spending time on this?” Well, because we cannot really figure out what goes wrong in us until we get serious about what we ARE. We are filled with “Nishmat chayyim,” the breath of life. Where does that come from ? Directly from God. What is the power source within each of us, that causes us to live each moment? It comes from God. We are God-powered. That does not mean WE are God. We are not. We are made of the ground, to which our bodies return. But what about the power that runs us, and puts the twinkle in our eyes? It is from far beyond us. The LORD God shares life and energy with us, so that we live. That is what we are. Now we are ready to better understand what happens when things go wrong within us.

If our life is God-powered, but then we are given total freedom to live as we choose, what happens to us when we live in ways that go against this power that causes us to be alive in the first place? Let’s be clear about this: maybe, we are designed so

that when we live in the ways God would have us live, we will be in harmony with God, with others, and even with our self. Things will run smoothly. But what happens when we live in ways that go against the ways of the Creator of our lives? That life-power still stays in us. But then something kicks in: people seem to think it is some great mystery. We call it conscience. What happens if we want to do something that goes against the power of life that is within us? We feel something, and it is not pleasant. We are bothered, we are bugged, maybe we are even haunted. Something inside us tells us not to do a certain thing! Well, maybe that is just a signal from God that says “No, you are heading the wrong way. Please don’t do this act. It will *hurt* you.”

Allow me to interject a great quote here from 1986:

“This notion of sin as stain or pollution is also common, and is important in the Hebrew Bible. This certainly emphasizes the personal nature of sin, which enters into and disfigures the person of the sinner.”

I think that is such a helpful thought in this. Sin is something that we do that **DISFIGURES** our person, our self. What does it mean to be disfigured? Who wants that? It means that our attractiveness has been spoiled. It is like taking a beautiful river and dumping garbage in it, or dumping coal slurry in it. Think about it. A beautiful river is such a beautiful and majestic thing. But thanks to us, how many are still beautiful and majestic? A beautiful river, filled with life and fresh flowing water, that is a thing of beauty. But, a human being, created in the Image of God, life-powered by God’s own power, that should be the most beautiful thing of all. But when we do things that go against what God has designed us to be, we are disfigured.

This disfigurement can get incredibly bad. We can go from just feeling bad, to feeling separated from God, to feeling separated from others, to feeling separated from our very selves and lives. I have never seen this portrayed more powerfully than in a movie, *The Lord of the Rings* “Return of the King.” In the movie, we see a character named Smeagol, who was a happy little person. He is fishing with his friend, and his friend accidentally finds this big gold ring, which is actually an evil ring. The character called Smeagol decides that he must have the ring, and actually kills his friend to get it. And then he descends into madness and darkness. He literally transforms into a monster, and he actually refers to himself as “WE.” He is still his original self, but now he has turned into something else as well. He says “...and we wept, we were so alone- we forget the taste of bread, the sound of trees, the softness of the wind, we even forgot our own name...”

This is a movie. This is not reality. Or is it? I think that the writer of this understood something about human nature. We are created to be something good, but we can be disfigured, and that disfigurement can go down and down and down. People can become so disfigured that they live in their own hell right now. That is the extreme worst that it can get. That is a long road to take. But we can take little steps on it. We need to remember that if in fact it is God who powers our life, then the fragrance of God is automatically within us. But when we try to stink it up by doing things that go against the goodness of God, there is going to be a conflict.

What is the nature of Sin? Sin is us going against the natural beauty and goodness that should be in us because we are knit together in our mother’s womb and the Nishmat Chayyim, the breath of Life, the breath of God, comes in and causes us to live. That is in us for all of our lives. It makes sense to me that

when we live in ways that besmirch that power of Life that is within us, we're going to feel it. We are disfigured. Unless we go against it so much that we get numb, or unless we go against it with the assistance of supernatural evil, which I believe does exist, we can go against the power of Life within us so far that we are in our own hell right now.

What is sin? Sin is what takes away from the power of God that is within us, and sin pollutes who we were designed to be, and sin makes us less than we should be. Will most people do like Smeagol? No, not at all. That is the ultimate example of having it all go wrong. When we end up separated from God, from our neighbors, and even from our very self, that is when it has all gone wrong, and the Image of God has been rubbed in sewage, that is as bad as it can get.

Let's remember that this power of life from God is in all other people as well. That is the ultimate reason why it is wrong to hurt anyone else. That is why the 10 Commandments contain ideas of how we go against God, but also how we can go against our neighbor. And if we do all of those things wrong, we eventually go against our very self, and bring disfigurement.

Know what you are. Know how precious we all are, and what high hopes God has that each of us will fulfill our destiny of living Imago Dei. God forgives us when we do wrong. That is why Jesus came to show God's forgiveness, so that we don't get so down that we crawl off into a cave to die. Does an act disfigure who God created you to be? That is a sin. This is why, as the Prophet Micah told us, we must Make Justice, we must love Goodness, and we must walk humbly with our God. AMEN.