

“Aimlessness and Sin”

Psalm 32, Luke 15.1–3, 11b–32

The Rev. Hal Chorprenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 21 March 04

“The God that holds you over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the Fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his Wrath towards you burns like Fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the Fire...O Sinner! Consider the fearful Danger you are in: ‘Tis a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and bottomless Pit, full of the Fire of Wrath, that you are hold over in the Hand of God, whose Wrath is provoked and incensed as much as against you as against many of the Damned in Hell: You hang by a slender Thread, with the Flames of divine Wrath flashing about it, and ready every Moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.”¹

Those are the inimitable words of the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, our forbear in the faith, at the Congregational Church in Enfield, Connecticut on July 8, 1741 at the height of the Great Awakening. This is one of the most famous sermons in American religious history, called, as you might imagine, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards preached this sermon because of his genuine concern for the souls of the people who heard him. This was his theological reality. I’m happy to tell you that another of Edwards’s famous sermons is called “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” which has a much different tone.

I started with Jonathan Edwards, though, to set the historical stage for a discussion about sin – something we don’t talk much about in mainline churches these days. But to link it to my sermon last week, I’d recall the words of Simone Weil, “All sins are attempts to fill voids.”

I would imagine that when I say the word, “sin” a good number of you would define it as rule-breaking. And traditionally, the rules of the game are spelled out in the Ten Commandments, any violation of which is considered sin. And I’m guessing that most of us try to observe the Ten Commandments. But listen to this different spin on the subject of rules and sin: Paul Tillich, the great German-American theologian of the mid-20th century writes that sin “should not be called ‘disobedience’...He who needs a law which tells him how to act or how not to act is already estranged from the source of the law which demands obedience.”² So, laws are not existentially designed to prevent people from acting badly; rather, they are an indication that people are already estranged from God. So the trick is not so much to observe the rules, but rather to avoid estrangement.

Many people think of the seven deadly sins, a non-biblical enumeration developed by the medieval church: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. Others of you, raised in the Catholic tradition, may think of mortal and venial sins. But, I’m guessing that for most of us these are alien concepts that don’t really help us live in right relationship with God and each other. So, I’m gong to walk through some 20th century and more recent thoughts regarding sin.



Let’s get back to Paul Tillich. He was an interesting man, who had been a chaplain in the German Army during World War One, and emigrated to the United States to teach at Union Seminary in New York in 1933. The basic way Tillich defines sin is

¹ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” by Jonathan Edwards in *American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King Jr.* (The Library of America, 1999) pp. 356-7.

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, v. II (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1957), quoted in *Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, p. 201

“estrangement” or “separation from God.” This is the primary definition of sin that you would tend to find in many mainline churches today.

These are Tillich’s words on the subject: “The state of existence is the state of estrangement. Man is estranged from the ground of his being, from other beings, and from himself.”³ So, *estrangement from God, others, and self* is the way Tillich defines sin.

Isn’t that what the story of the prodigal son reminds us of in ourselves? We see the literal estrangement of a son from his family. He takes his share of the family’s wealth and burns through it in “dissolute living.” (If Mel Gibson were to make a film version of this parable, I’m sure we’d see a half an hour with all the gory details of dissolute living.) The young son takes his share of the goods and blows out of town, intentionally estranging himself from his family, while his righteous brother continues to labor hard for years on their father’s land.

Are there times in your life when you have felt estranged from God, others, or even yourself? I’ve certainly had times when I’ve felt estranged from friends and family members, and I’ve done my best to push them away even further, which promotes an awful, downward spiral. And there was a time in my life that I basically put God on “ignore.” And there are times when I’ve worked myself into oblivion, to the point where I lost touch with who I am as a person.

Tillich also writes about hubris as being a characteristic root of sin. Hubris is a Greek word that we use in English, and it’s vaguely synonymous with arrogance or chutzpah, the way we use it. But in classical Greek literature, hubris conveyed the sense of insolence against the gods. Tillich says that we fall into this type of sin when we totally turn away from God. Again, this isn’t disobedience or rule violation, it’s deeper than that. And it isn’t being upset with God for something; *the Psalms are great at expressing anger toward God*. It’s an abandonment of relationship with God, resulting in estrangement.

When most Protestants talk about sin as “separation from God,” it’s in the context of actively doing an action that causes such separation: it’s like the “dissolute living” stage of the prodigal son. We’ve done something wrong. And clearly there are actions that belong on that list: murder, rape, avarice, and others. But, Tillich speaks of existentially: “The state of existence is the state of estrangement.” Sin happens *before* we lift a finger to do something.

That may sound a bit like original sin to you. (For those unfamiliar with the concept, it comes from Augustine, and concludes that human nature is sinful, and the cause of it derives from the Adam and Eve eating from the fruit of knowledge in the Garden of Eden. So, we bear that mark of being “East of Eden” – being estranged from God.) But, not so fast, says Tillich. He says that the words “original sin” are “so much burdened with literalistic absurdities that it is practically impossible to use them any longer.”⁴

But, getting back to Tillich’s state of estrangement, he asserts that it is part of our nature to be estranged and then to grow toward the wholeness of relationship with God, with others, and with self. It is an intentional maturation process with which we need help. It would be hard to grow into relationships with other people if you didn’t have a family to raise you. And it’s difficult to grow into relationship with God without a community of faith to support you on our common journey. And God knows we need good therapists to help reconnect us with ourselves!

³ *ibid.*, p. 199.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 200.

So, when you think of Paul Tillich's way of defining sin, think of the word, "estrangement."



Another great voice of the UCC tradition in Reinhold Niebuhr, who was part of the Evangelical and Reformed tradition of the United Church. Niebuhr is one of the most esteemed theologians of the 20th century and is perhaps best known for his "Serenity Prayer," used by 12-Step programs around the world. And it was Niebuhr who was largely responsible for inviting Tillich to Union Seminary in the 30s.

I think if Niebuhr were alive today, he'd feel quite affirmed (and horrified) at the way his definition of sin has played out in the 30 years since his death. See how this concept strikes you: "The ego which falsely makes itself the center of existence in its pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinate other life to its will and thus does injustice to other life."⁵

Think about the ramifications of Niebuhr's statement. I'd like you to consider that not only in the context of individual sin, but collective sin as well. When an empire or nation (be it Rome or any other) puts itself the center of existence, its national or imperial pride and will-to-power inevitably subordinates other peoples and does injustice to other lives. When I spoke about domination systems several weeks ago, this is the type of collective sin Niebuhr was addressing.

So, when you think of Niebuhr in relation to the concept of sin, think about **self-centeredness** and **primal self-concern**.



I want to introduce you to one final framework of sin, and it is from a non-Christian perspective that is deeply congruent with the life and teachings of Jesus, who did, after all, make a habit of hanging out with sinners and tax collectors. It comes from Mohandas Gandhi. He enumerated seven "social sins," and I hope to do a sermon series on them some time, but I wanted to introduce them to you briefly, because they bring the notion of sin out of the strictly individual realm. They are: politics without principle, wealth without work, commerce without morality, pleasure without conscience, education without character, science without humanity, and worship without sacrifice.⁶

Each of them is driven by self-centeredness, and each causes estrangement from God, others, and self.



Now, I don't want to leave you hanging with a sense of existential angst with all this talk of sin, so let's get back to Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, which is one of those stories that's really difficult to hear if you're like the older brother, who apparently gets it right. But, it's really good news for those of us who are like the younger son, who have fallen away and become estranged because of our self-centeredness.

It's amazing how the father reacts in this story, because he's been wronged and abandoned by one of the sons he loves. And how does the father respond? By being filled with compassion, throwing his arms around him, kissing him, dressing him in the best robe in the house, putting sandals on his feet, rings on his fingers and killing the fatted calf for a banquet. And the father says to the righteous elder son, "You are always with

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, v. I (NY: Scribners, 1941) in *Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life*, p. 137.

⁶ Quoted in Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Co.), p. xiii

me, and all that is mine is your. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

The younger son took steps to end his estrangement: he confesses that he has sinned against his father and against God. He asks for forgiveness, which **restores relationship**. Tillich says that love is “the striving for the reunion of the separated” and “the opposite of estrangement.”⁷

All we need to do to come home again is to ask. As Psalm 32 records, “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not hide my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” We are like the younger son, and we need to ask for forgiveness and reverse our estrangement, and restore relationship.

The good news is this, my friends: there is always room for us back home. There is always a fatted calf waiting to be slaughtered in celebration of our return.

We are, after all, sinners in the hands of a forgiving God.

Amen.

⁷ Tillich, op. cit., p. 200.