

March 7, 2010    COMMUNION SUNDAY

Scripture: Luke 15:17-19    Isaiah 55:1-9

Title: "Coming to Grips with Sin"

Call to Worship:

O God, thou art my God, I seek thee,

My soul thirst for thee;

    My flesh faints for thee,

    As in a dry and weary land

    where no water is.

So I have looked upon thee in the sanctuary,

Beholding thy power and glory.

    Because thy steadfast love is better

    Than life, my lips will praise thee.

So I will bless thee as long as I live;

I will lift up my hands and call on thy name.

    My soul is feasted as with marrow and fat

    And my mouth praises thee with joyful lips.

When I think of thee upon my bed, and meditate

On thee in the watches of the night;

    For thou hast been my help, and in the

    Shadow of thy wings I sing for joy.

My soul clings to thee;

Thy right hand upholds me.

    Our souls cling to thee;

    Thy right hand upholds us.

Hymns: #277    O God, Our Faithful God

    #516    Lord, We Have Come    (Communion Hymn)

    #382    Somebody's Knocking at Your Door

Prayer of Confession: To stand around your table, O Lord, is a humbling experience. We gather here to confess that we are not worthy of the sacrifice of Your Son. Like the Prodigal Son, we have come to the conclusion that we have sinned against Thee and we are not worthy to be called Your children. But You open Your arms wide and receive us back into Your presence. Even after our thoughts have wandered into the far country of self aggrandizement. And even after we have allowed our behavior to deny your Lordship. You welcome us home. Time after time, we wandering sheep find shelter in the protection of Your foal. Forgive us, O God, and prepare our hearts for the celebration of Your Son's Supper. We pray in His name. Amen.

Profession of Faith:    Brief Statement    1-6, 52-80

Scripture: Luke 15:17-19 Isaiah 55:1-9

Title: "Coming to Grips with Sin"

There is not enough time here this morning to adequately deal with the subject of sin. The Old Testament and the New Testament are filled with thousands of illusions to sin. Indeed, when you count the number of Hebrew words that refer to "sin" you discover more than fifty. Every little nuance of moral and spiritual failure, of man's challenge to God's authority and man's rejection of God's will in their lives is covered by a different Hebrew word. One commentator has written: "It is not difficult to find biblical passages referring to sin; as a matter of fact, there few chapters which do not contain some reference to what sin is or does." (S.J. DeVries, Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, vol. 4, pg. 361)

Sin is what it is. In the words of the Westminster Fathers: any lack of conformity to the will of God. That pretty well sums it up.

Our goal this morning is to take a look at sin through the eyes of someone who was steeped in it. The Prodigal.

Now, this young boy wasn't a bad sort of fellow. He never intended to offend his father and to squander his goods. It's just that he was focused on himself. He was the center of his own universe. What can be so wrong with having a little fun? What can be so wrong with eating good food and being the life of the party? After all, God doesn't want us to spend our lives with long faces and sad hearts. Music and Dance and Fine wines were created to give us pleasure, were they not?

Out in Sandy Level on Rt. 40 heading toward Penhook, the Sandy Level Baptist church has a message board out front. And this week it says: "The Wages of Sin is Death, so, quit before payday." The Prodigal simply did not know when to quit. And the only thing that forced him to quit was the depletion of his resources. Now, it's so easy to see the situation with regard to the Prodigal. But have we ever stopped to think that we are often like him. We are much more sophisticated than he. We fool ourselves into believing that the resources won't dry up... after all... We have credit cards. And we may not be out there boozing it up and running with fast women. But we use our plastic to give us the feeling that the resources will never end.....so we find it hard to put limits on our spending and the accumulation of goods.

But the fun does end, doesn't it? There always comes a time of reckoning. All of us have been to the point where we have to stop and say. "This is not Good" "I have overspent."

My desires got the better of me. I'm in trouble now! Whatever will I do?

You see, sometimes when we think about the Prodigal, we let ourselves get bogged down in the behaviors of his life. Oh that bad youngster: drinking and carousing with his friends. And look at the way he played with the women. And we start naming the specific sins. That way, we can separate ourselves from him. We don't do those things.

We just overspend our credit cards. We'll hold off next month and get caught up. Right!

Coming to grip with sin is never easy. We say, "I am a sinner, justly deserving God's displeasure and without hope, save in the mercy of God through Jesus Christ."

It's good to say this, but even while we are making this profession of sinfulness, the back of our minds are saying: "Well, I'm not as bad as that younger son." Oh, I'm a sinner, but I'm not a real bad sinner. I've never killed or abused children, or robbed a bank, or cooked the books and imbezzled. And I certainly don't drink until I lose control of my faculties. No, we are not as bad as that younger son.

I can remember when I was 12 and went through confirmation classes at First Church in Winchester. Even as I was taking the class and making my public profession before the Elders and the Congregation, I wasn't quite sure that I was such a bad sinner that I needed Jesus in my life. It was more like this was something that was expected from me.

Our children here at Altavista Presbyterian, they know they are sinners, but when they listen to the newscasts about the crimes taking place out there in the world, they know that they are not that bad.

So, what we need is a better grasp of what Sin is. Not measured in particular behaviors, but in how well we stack up to the perfect image which Christ modeled for us. And of course, none of us will match His mark. But are we striving for it? Do we make an attempt to be loving and kind, as he was? Are our lives examples of the peace which he came preaching? Do we care for the outsider and the stranger and do we tend to the poor and

downtrodden? These are the positive behaviors which call us to walk in the Master's footsteps.

You know, there came a time when the younger son was jerked up by the back of the neck and he came face to face with the reality of his life. All of these reality shows on TV don't come anywhere near what he went through. And the only thing he could do as to drop to his knees and shout out: I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands.

We know the rest of the story. The father does not treat his lost son as a hired hand. The boy is welcomed back into the family with rejoicing. And that is the heart of the Gospel; the essence of the Good News! So it is with us. No matter how far we stray from God. No matter how bad the relationship becomes between us and God, God is always ready to receive us back.

I don't know about you, but I couldn't make it through a single day without this assurance of God's Love. It is only within the context of God's Love and Forgiveness, that I can fully understand the depth of my own sinfulness. And don't say, "Well, you're a Preacher. You're not supposed to sin." As I have grown in my ministry over the past 45 years, I have come to understand something about myself. Perhaps one of the forces that drove me to the ministry and keeps me in the ministry is the daily struggle that I know goes on in my relationship with God and with His Church. It aint easy! And ministers fail in that struggle too often. The one thing I have going for me is that I know God's Grace is sufficient and constantly available to me and to everyone.

So, when the Prodigal cries out, "I have sinned against God and am not worthy to be my father's son." It opens the door up for God's Grace. One old preacher was fond of saying: "When tears flow because of sin, the Grace of God comes flowing in." That's just another way of saying that we cannot talk about sin without acknowledging the overpowering presence of God's Grace.

Yes, we are all sinners. We are all on the journey of life and we struggle with our relationship with God all the time. As Reformed Believers, followers of Calvin and Knox, we know that God's Grace, not the keeping of laws, makes salvation real.

Our Lenten travels down the road to Easter morning need to pass through the reality check of our own sinfulness. But remember, dwelling on our sinfulness is not the end of Easter. Resurrection and New Life are.

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