

Lighten Up: The Joyful Truth about Sin & Grace

Week 4: Can grace “fix” sin?

Romans 5:20

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

David Lewicki, preaching

- King James Version: where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:
- NRSV: where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,
- Voice: wherever sin grew and spread, God’s grace was there in fuller, greater measure.
- Wycliffe: where guilt was plenteous, grace was more plenteous
- Phillips: though sin is shown to be wide and deep, God’s grace is wider and deeper still
- CEB: where sin increased, grace multiplied even more.
- Message: When it’s sin versus grace, grace wins hands down.

For the first three weeks of this Lenten series, I’ve been trying to tell a great and important story about sin and grace. Sin is the action of human beings that would try and oppose the love of God. But grace is this wonderful, profound sustaining love that is God’s persistent, unresistable gift to Creation.

Theologically, it’s grace—and not sin—that is our true nature. Love is our nature. Every human being is created by God and we are created good and we are made for good. We are created by love for love. Grace is where we begin—and what we always come home to.

It’s in the light of grace that we can courageously confront the sin that appears in our lives. While I agree with Julian of Norwich that sin has no “reality” to it—it doesn’t even belong in the same category as grace, we can still admit that the effects of sin are real. I don’t know how sin has touched your life. It’s left its mark on all of us. I’d like to ask you to do something hard. I’d like you to think for a few moments about the harm that sin has done to you.

- How about lies that were told to you—by someone you trusted. What lies have you told that have hurt others?
- What about judgement? Have others judged you in a way that has hurt you? Have you hurt someone by judging them unfairly?
- Maybe your life was marked by violence—by yours or someone else’s.
- What about greed? We always want more? How has greed touched your life?
- Maybe it’s something left undone? Someone you should have helped...

All of us have been damaged by personal sin. Often with sin there is trauma involved. I want to ask you, in the safety of this place, to hold the pain of sin in your lap. Hold it in the light of grace.

Here's where your sock puppet comes in. Go ahead and put the sock on your hand. This sock now represents the sin. Only you know exactly what the sin is. Now, remember—this sin is not part of the world God created. It’s a cagey interloper. Over the years, we’ve called it Satan, we’ve called it “demons.” Psychology calls it our “shadow” or “urges.” But it’s part of our life. I

want you to imagine what this sin sounds like. What kind of voice does it have? What's its agenda? What does it want with you? Will you let your sin talk to you?

- Maybe it needs to whisper. I know for some of you, this isn't possible to do right now. It's too much to think about in front of all of these people. You may think about doing this later, by yourself.

Ok. That was good! Let's try something different.

Not all sins are personal. We are also embedded in what are called "systemic or structural sin." These are the corrupted patterns of social life that shape our world. For example, we live in a world in which those of us who are poor live in some communities and those who are rich live in another—the outcomes for people in the poor communities are far worse. That's structural sin—what's worse is that those of us who own property in the rich communities are financially invested in their preservation. Structural sin was racism in the United States; it's growing up in a world in which your skin color matters for the outcome of your life. Structural sin an economic system that is considered "healthy" when it is destroying the conditions for human life on the planet. Structural sin is sin that corrupts the kinds of choices we have.

Let's try it again with our puppets. Pick a structural sin that wounds you that has hurt you personally. See it in your mind's eye. Now, put it on your hand. Imagine the puppet is this structural sin. What does it sound like? What is its agenda—what does it want? Will you let it talk to you? Remember, sin is a distortion or corruption of what God made and intended.

- (people talk to puppets)

Sin—in both its personal and structural forms—is so much a part of our lives. It can do so much damage. We need to talk about how we deal with sin. What do we do when sin shows up in our lives, or in the life of this world and threatens our well-being?

What are our choices?

We can ignore it. We can be ashamed about it, try to hide it. Can we run from it? Can we yell at it? Can we cut it off?

What does God do with sin? How does God deal with sin when it appears?

Our tradition has taught that Jesus took care of our sins. That he "died for our sins"—and that was God's response. You know by now that I'm not at all convinced this idea is helpful. The idea is that we sin uncontrollably, and that we accumulate a debt because of our sin that must be paid off. Jesus, this version of the story says, "paid our debts" by dying on the cross. It's never been clear exactly who Jesus pays or why God demands payment in the death of God's Beloved child. Beyond that, it's really not obvious to me how this deals with our sin in the present. There's so much in that story that feels arcane and abstract.

But our tradition has plenty of other wonderful wisdom about how God's grace fixes our sin. God's love and mercy—grace—do overcome sin—but not through an atoning sacrificial death. Then how?

First of all, grace works through repentance. Jesus' very first message is "repent and believe the good news." Repentance is turning around. God issues a perpetual invitation to turn around. To turn away and turn toward: away from sin and toward love. That perpetual invitation to repent from sin is God's grace at work. It means there is no one who is so lost in sin that we can't turn around.

Here's a second way that grace deals with sin: *forgiveness*. God's capacity to forgive—and willingness to forgive—sin is limitless. This is the scandal of grace. The most powerful moment in Luke's gospel is Jesus, hanging to die on a cross, reckoning with the worst of human sin, and saying, "forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do." Jesus always offers forgiveness. We are not the worst thing we have ever done. We do not have to live ashamed. We are never condemned in our sin. That doesn't mean God doesn't *see* our sin. God sees it. God knows it. I've always believed that forgiveness is judgement—it's the most severe kind of judgment. Forgiveness sees clearly the nature of the sin and the harm it does; but forgiveness says, "that was not the real you; you are capable of something different, something better, you were made by love for love." Forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook—it's expecting more of them.

The final way God's grace deals with sin is through Jesus' death. But not by some cosmic ransom payment. The Apostle's Creed testifies, *Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell*. I will always affirm that this is one of the most powerful and most hopeful ideas in our faith—that Jesus goes into hell. Part of reckoning with sin being able to laugh it on the one hand (which we're doing today), while never ever trivializing it. Sin can be unspeakable evil. I remember walking around Ground Zero a few days after September 11th and seeing the scale of the destruction and the suffering and I knew that hell had to be possible. There is in this world unrepentant, unmoved evil that takes over some human lives—and if we believe in a good God, there must be a punishment for people who yield to that evil. In my mind, there has to be a hell. So why, then, does the Apostle's Creed affirm that Jesus goes there? Because of love. Because love is the most powerful force in all of creation. Because nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There is nothing that God's resurrecting love will not do and there is nowhere love will not go to find us and free us. God made it. God loves it. God keeps it.

Repentance, forgiveness, and a love strong enough to liberate hell itself. That is how grace deals with sin.

So what do we do with our sin?

We love it. We love it. Fiercely, tenderly, persuasively, relentlessly. If the enemy of the good is sin, Jesus' instruction was to love your enemies.

Talk to your sin.

- Is it lying? Tell your lies not to be so insecure. Tell the truth—even the embarrassing truth—it is welcome to come out and play.
- Is it judgment? Let go of judgment and look at everything and everyone through the eyes of the Creator.
- Is it violence? What is violence so afraid? There's nothing to be afraid of. Perfect love casts out all fear.
- Is it your complicity in racism or inequality or environmental degradation? Love will show you the courageous path of repentance and repair.

Will you take another moment, and go ahead and talk to your sin. What does the voice of grace—what does the love of God—say to the sin that wants to oppose the will of God?

(talk to your puppets)

God has not left us powerless against sin. There is a gentle, merciful, persistent, relentless grace—and God pours this grace into the world, through Christ and by the Holy Spirit. Whenever you encounter sin, let God's grace deal with it.

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though sin is shown to be wide and deep, God's grace is wider and deeper still
When it's sin versus grace, grace wins hands down. (take sock off)*