What do we mean when we say "sin" and "salvation?"
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1 Cor 15:1-6
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> Now I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 2 through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. 3 For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures 4 and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

Sin. Salvation. Are there any thornier two words in Christianity? What do they mean to *you*? Do you have personal history with these words? Do they draw you in? Push you away? Take a minute now and just share with each another in twos or threes. What is sin? And what do you think is meant by salvation?

"*Christ died for our sins*." That phrase we just heard from Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthian church, defines "the gospel"—the good news from God—in much of Christianity. On this slim and ambiguous phrase, an entire idea of who human beings are, and who God is--has been constructed. I think we've screwed it up.

I will say what I mean. I mean that the way the Protestant Church tends to think about our sin and Chris's salvation is distorted. This thinking has roots in the writing of the apostle Paul, who, while not a disciple of Jesus, gave us our earliest recorded ideas about what Christ's death and resurrection *might* mean. The 4th century Algerian bishop Augustine; then the 15th century German monk Martin Luther, read Paul and from Paul developed the ideas of "original" sin, and an individualized salvation (we're saved one by one); our salvation is confirmed by cognitive belief in Christ's saving power. We shouldn't blame Paul for any of this. Paul doesn't actually say any of these things. There's been a several-decades long scholarly fist-fight about Paul's message that shakes the foundations of Protestant theology. The issues too complex for me to get into today, but if you want to do your own research, type "new perspective on Paul" into your search engine, and you'll realize how much of the theology the church has taught is based on bad translations of Greek words.

What our church got, though, about sin and salvation, is the interpretation of Augustine and Luther. They read Paul and invented this excessively brutal image of human nature. Augustine and Luther said you are a lump of sin; you're sin all the way down. You are so bad, so objectionable to God, right out of the womb, you can't do anything good. We are powerless against our sinful nature. These guys went further. They said, because of our sin, we deserve God's to burn in hell. The only thing, they said, that can save us from this

inevitable fate is God's grace. That grace comes *only* through the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ. It is Christ's blood sacrifice on the cross that atones for our sin. Who gets this grace? Augustine and Luther said, those who believe are saved; most are condemned.

This story is so broken. It strips us of our free will. I turns Jesus into little more than payoff in a divine deal with the devil; it turns God into a monster who sacrifices God's Beloved Child to pay a debt. We must let go of Augustine and Luther's version of sin and salvation. But I want to caution us against abandoning the ideas of our sin and Christ's salvation altogether. There's something there for us, still. Something that Paul was trying to get at. I want to offer a different way of understanding these ideas for us.

First, as offensive as Augustine and Luther are, their theology has still resonated over the years with so many people. Why? One reason is that human beings can suck. We are the worst, sometimes. So selfish. Lying—to others and ourselves. Hurtful in the things we do; more hurtful in the good we could do, but don't. One of the reasons Augustine and Luther's teachings have connected with people over the years is that sin—acting against the will of God—is a real thing, and it has real consequences.

- What did you say it is?

I was thinking about sin this this week after we had this hard community meeting about the Fridge. Fridge patrons have done some nasty things that have hurt people. But I also saw how easy it is to name the sins of unhoused people who live their lives exposed on the streets—their sins are out there for all to see and condemn. How easy it is for those of us who live comfortable private lives to hide our sins behind closed doors, to crouch, protected, behind fear and bias. Augustine and Luther were right in that people often suck. Not just some people. Everyone. Paul says in Romans 3 "all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God." It's everywhere. Sin may not be original, but it does feel universal.

Augustine and Luther also, I think, got something else right. They didn't believe that we could deal with our own sin effectively. There are unwell parts of our personalities—things that are so deep in us, we've justified them for so long, we have no idea how to fix these parts of ourselves. We're wounded people who wound others. It's not just individual sins that confound us. Sins get passed on in family systems; your parents were screwed up and screwed you up in turn through no one's fault. And the world that we participate in is riddled with structural sins. Men rule over women. Colonialsim. Environmental destruction. Generational inequality. Racism. So many of us did antiracism work in the wake of George Floyd's murder only to realize that even if you can shed your own biases, racism is in healthcare, lifespans, housing, education, wealth, criminal justice—its woven into the way the world works. Augustine and Luther said that we couldn't get sin out. It's not because we inherited it from Adam. It's because sin has contaminated the water system that we drink from every day.

We do need help with sin. We need help to see it and identify it. We need therapists. We need friends who help us make different choices than the impulsive ones that trap us in destructive patterns. We need justice movements to model different social practices and social structures than the broken ones we inherited. But to deal with sin, we don't just need therapy, and friends, and movements. We need grace. Eventually, we get to the end of the self-improvement rope. Eventually, we get to the end of the I'll try harder rope. We get the end of the idealism rope. And we find that our best efforts can't fix what's broken within us, between us, and around us. Our anger boils up, our despair seeps down, we blame others for our problems, we embrace ideologies of enmity, we settle for lesser goods, we worship lesser gods.

We need grace for our sin. Not because we're sinful to the core, but because sin is a crafty, formidable, relentless enemy. Paul says, "the wages of sin is death." I've lived long enough to how sin hurts all of us; and to know I'm often no match for it.

John Thatamanil is one of the best scholars of comparative religion in the world. Religions, Thatamanil says, don't stick around because their ideas are "true." Doctrine doesn't matter. Religions last, he says, because they are *useful*. What he means is that human life is hard. All of us hurt; all of us suffer. Good religion, Thatamanil says, is like a doctor who diagnoses our predicament, who tells us how we got into this mess, and what our prognosis is, and tells us how we might be cured.

Christianity's prognosis of the human condition is that sin is a devastating part of the reality that we each face. As hard as we try, sin pushes back harder. Christianity also says that God is compassionate; God doesn't leave us in sin. God, out of love, rescues us.

The great mystery is how. How does God save human beings from sin?

Our tradition says that in order to find the answer, we have to look at a man hanging on a cross. Something there saves. This person on the cross, we believe, is God. God is experiencing the pain that comes from sin—God takes sin—our sin—into God's own body. God absorbs the hurt, the pain that we cause ourselves and each other.

God, in suffering, doesn't retaliate. God doesn't send an army or a flood. God doesn't seek revenge. God says, "forgive them, they know not what they do." God dies.

Three days later, that same crucified body is raised. The Body of Christ lives. The Risen Body speaks of peace. The Risen Body bears mercy. The Risen Body is not afraid—because sin and death are swallowed up by a great, great love. The Risen Body is you, the church: forgiven, loved, and free.

"Christ died for our sins." May this good news continue to bring new life to all of us.