

The Truth about Sin

Isaiah 30: 1, 8-18

October 16, 2022

“Oh, rebellious children!”

I do not always relate to our God’s angrier episodes, but there are some mornings, usually when we are already late, and getting out the door is apparently the most challenging thing I could possibly ask my toddlers to do, that these words rise in me, sometimes escaping my mouth.

“Sweet beloveds, why do you do this to your mother?!”

The prophet Isaiah, of course, has much bigger fish to fry than the frustration of a parent trying to herd her children out of the house and into the minivan on a Monday morning. Expressing the heart of God, Isaiah rails against the people that he has been called to prophesy to, bemoaning their hardness, their propensity to get it wrong, their sin.

The doctrine of sin has a varied history in the Church and even in the North American Church of the past century. Debate about its appropriateness or relevance is both ancient and new.

I find that one of the greatest challenges to an orthodox, Reformed understanding of sin these days is the social-scientific research that abounds on shame. Like many of you, I imagine, books by the prolific researcher and author Brene Brown have sat atop my bedside table since she was launched into the spotlight after giving a TED Talk several years ago. Among other concepts, Brown focuses on the power of shame and insists that whereas guilt is experienced as “I did something wrong,” shame is the experience: “I AM wrong. I AM bad.” And the research shows how detrimental the experience of shame is to our health—mental, emotional, physical, relational. According to Brown, it is no motivator of change.

So, what do we make of sin? The Reformed tradition has made it clear that it goes beyond action. It’s more than “I did something bad.” No, it’s both act and condition, deed and nature. It is the tip of the iceberg and the water itself. It is not “I did something sinful.” It’s “I am a sinner.”

If that’s what the Bible and our theological tradition says about sin, then can we responsibly continue to embrace such a concept when we know what we do about shame? We’ll come back to that, but first I’m going to tell a story.

Memory is indicative, and I have a clear memory from the second semester of kindergarten. Near the end of the year, my mother received a phone call from the school principal. She was told that my painting, named “Where the Wild Things Are,” had been selected for the district-wide, annual gallery that displayed what everyone had been up to in art class that year. My family would be invited to join me for a celebratory reception on the day of the gallery’s opening.

One of countless projects we completed in Mrs. Bly’s art class, I barely remembered that painting but nevertheless swelled with pride. It never occurred to me until that day that some of us got to display our paintings in esteemed places, places other than dad’s office or the refrigerator door. And so as my anticipation built, so did my remembrance of that painting. In my mind, it had become worthy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

You can imagine the horror that I felt when the day arrived, and, tracing the art-lined walls with my pointer finger, I turned the corner and I saw my name under a framed picture daring to be my own. As my

parents *ooh'd* and *ahh'd* and said all the right things, I slipped into a six-year-old's tearful indignation, insisting that this was *not my work*, that there must have been some kind of mix-up. *This* ridiculous picture looked nothing like the illustrations in Maurice Sendak's magnificent book and more like a young child's experiment with primary colors and under-developed fine motor skills.

It was a terrible afternoon, eased with ice cream and more affirmation, but I do wonder if that was the day I ceased to really *create*. I would keep creating, of course, but it was never with the abandon of a six-year-old armed with a paintbrush and a boundless imagination. It was never with the same freedom and playfulness.

Children have always made theologians pause when discerning the meaning, the way, the origin of sin.

Jesus said that adults would not enter the kingdom until they became like children. Presumably he was talking about their dependence, their lack of self-consciousness, their marginality as something to emulate.

But children also reveal the sin of the world in often discomfoting ways. We may be uncomfortable with the idea of naming a child a sinner. (It is certainly far from the first word that I think of when I think of my children.)

But as a child, my own swift and large reaction to the painting claiming to be mine revealed a swirl of forces that are hard to name in any other way than sin. I had—at a tender age—accepted the lie that my worth was determined by what I produced. I was disillusioned, extremely embarrassed, and yes, ashamed. Brene Brown says that the strongest determinant of shame is an unwanted identity. My fear, although I couldn't have named it that way at the time, was that my identity—rather than that of *serious person* and *professional artist*—had become something silly and juvenile.

Where had I learned to think and feel that way?

Where do any of us learn to think and feel that way?

Rather than denoting something irredeemably ugly or consistently sinister, could sin—at its core—be the acceptance of an alternative identity, anything other than beloved child of God?

We can see how a rejection of that identity spins off in a variety of directions, becoming impossibly entangled, hurting ourselves and everyone around us. Sin, added to sin.

While the six-year-old's experience leads to under-confidence and a cessation of creating out of love and delight, the 40-year-old's experience could and so often does lead to over-confidence and a refusal to place before the God to whom he belongs his every plan and decision and thought and move and breath. Carrying out plans that are not God's. Making alliances, but against God's will. "Doing good," but failing to see the harm in the good that he believes he is orchestrating.

It reminds me of an interview that I heard Krista Tippett give a few years ago.

In the year 2015, New York Times foreign correspondent Anand Giridharadas delivered a speech to his peers at the Aspen Institute. He was a fellow that year in an organization whose stated mission was to "spark intellectual inquiry and exchange, create a diverse worldwide community of leaders committed to the greater good, and provide a nonpartisan forum for reaching solutions on vital public policy issues."

Giridharadas was the first to say that the folks who gather at the Aspen Institute are good and genuinely interested and committed to using their wealth, their connections, their power to making the world a better place. They are his friends.

But when he took the microphone nearing the end of his fellowship year, he began his speech by saying he wouldn't be speaking about forgiveness that day, which was a topic in one of his previous books. He said he wasn't going to speak about forgiveness in the way they expected, but that he might need their forgiveness once the speech was over.

He went on to deliver a searing indictment of the group, joking that while they rarely came to consensus on anything, there was an unspoken consensus that grounded and animated the whole experiment, and the consensus was this: the winners of our age must be challenged to do more good, but never, ever tell them to do less harm.

Reflecting later on that speech and on his time at the Aspen Institute, Giridharadas said that in those spaces, “He became very interested in the silences, what they were not allowed to talk about or what they, just by custom, didn’t talk about when they came together to talk about making the world a better place. So, the Aspen Consensus was: You can tell the rich and powerful in our age to do more good, but you can never tell them to do less harm. You can tell them to give more, but you cannot tell them to take less. You can tell them to share the spoils of extreme capitalism, but you can’t tell them to renovate capitalism.”

He said, “One of the things that started to fill me with unease in these spaces was what felt like an empty positivity. That positivity essentially takes the view that any kind of social problem is an inefficiency problem. Or we haven’t turned the dials quite right, and if we just turned them a little differently or figured out how to maybe assign those teachers to that school or maybe—just tweaks; if we just tweaked things and fixed things and scaled things and made things a little more efficient, we could get to the Promised Land.”

Summing it up with another spiritual framework, he said what he worried about in these spaces of wealth and power was that there was an *underdeveloped sense of human darkness*.

Giridharadas may have found a kindred spirit in Isaiah, who mocked the people when he reflected their spinelessness back to them: “Speak to us smooth things, please,” as if they could not possibly be part of the problem.

He may have found a kindred spirit in American

ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, as well. Regarded by many colleagues in his day as hopelessly cynical, Niebuhr nevertheless changed the course of North American mainline churches when he attacked the naivety of the religious establishment, mincing no words. His chief theological complaint—said in different ways over the years—was the rejection of sin, the refusal to acknowledge just how real and pervasive it is.

To Niebuhr, the church got it wrong when—attempting to be more palatable—it did away with “the fall.” He wasn’t interested in having a pointless debate about the “origin” of sin in any biological sense. *How do we pass it on?* Rather, he was convicted by it existentially. He famously said that it was “attested by every page of human history.”

Friends, the hard truth about sin is that it is real. It’s a word with a lot of baggage, but there is no other concept that comes even close to describing the insidious ways that we continue to miss the mark, and with devastating consequence. We don’t live in a world where children go to bed with growling stomachs and women fear to go on a run through their neighborhood and nations threaten to annihilate each other without the presence of a faceless and formless *thing* that grows like a cancer in our hearts, in our systems, in our world. Like the iniquity that Isaiah names—like the vessel that is smashed so ruthlessly there is not among its fragments a shred for dipping water—our sin continues to implode us from within.

The truth about sin is that it is real. It is ugly. It grieves our God.

The truth about grace is that it is real. It is abundant. And with it, our God stands waiting.

When we go back to the origins, to Genesis, we see that the second creation story is about the fall. As Niebuhr would put it, Adam and Eve ate from that forbidden tree of good and evil, and they were trying to become *like* God, infinite.

When we go back farther, we see that the first creation story is about the birth of the world, and we humans as stewards of it. As Niebuhr would put it, and as the Bible would put it, we were created in the image and likeness of God—among other things, capable of self-transcendence that enables us to accept our finiteness, our dependence.

Friends, this means the truest thing about us is that we were made in God's image, called to create, as our God creates. Called to create out of nothing and for nothing other than love, as our God creates out of nothing and for nothing other than love. We were created not to be but to reflect God. It is a dance that we've been invited to.

The grace given to us in Jesus Christ promises that we can and we will return to that truest self. In the meantime, we confess—over and over and over again—and we find the hope and the freedom to begin the journey back.

Thanks be to God. Amen.