

The Singular Sin

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March 5, 2016 (Lent 1, Year A [Romans 5:12-19])

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Last week I spoke with a woman whose dead husband caused her to trip and fall a few weeks before Christmas. This miraculous tripping resulted in a blow to the head so severe she ended up in the hospital undergoing a CT scan. The CT scan, in turn, revealed the early stages of a brain tumor, which doctors anticipate being able to successfully treat. But the tumor, which is in a part of the brain unrelated to balance, never would have been found if she hadn't tripped, which is why she's convinced her dead husband did it. And I have no reason to doubt that he did. To her, this is a miracle — now that she knows what is wrong, she can be treated. She can be healed. Without being tripped, she wouldn't have known.

In an situation, knowing what the problem is, understanding what's wrong, is absolutely crucial to fixing it. Today I want us to look at this section of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, at the way Paul describes what is spiritually wrong with us. Paul knows, and tells us, what the ultimate problem is. The problem is sin.

We tend to think in terms of sins, the individual actions. But Paul thinks in terms of sin, singular. Sin in this sense is structural, a sort of cosmic power built into the way things are in the world.

To understand what Paul is trying to tell us about what God has done in Jesus Christ, we have to stop thinking about sins and start thinking about sin. Jesus didn't die because you possess a propensity to pride, or because you have a tempest of a temper, or because you like like your liquor. Our individual sins are bad; and they separate us from God — but honestly, Jesus isn't dying on the cross because some people in suburbia sometimes have affairs. Those are sins — but Jesus is dying to address sin.

Maybe it's just because this last month or so seems to have been one of those seasons in which illnesses have just run through our community, and so conversations up at church during the week have been full of discussions of who has what, punctuated by descriptions of coughs, sore throats, fevers, and pains, but it strikes me that Paul talks of sin like we speak of disease. Sin is like a virus — let's go with something good and terrible, like ebola. Sin, in the singular, is ebola. Most of the time with ebola, death is the end result. But before it kills people, ebola causes symptoms: fever, nausea, chills, and hemorrhaging. Sin does the same thing, before it kills people, there are all sorts of symptoms. The symptoms of sin

(singular) are the sins we commit, of anger, pride, lust, selfishness, meanness, and so on. But the greatest symptom, the final symptom, the one which ultimately afflicts us all is death.

Paul, living in the first century, didn't understand disease and sickness the way we do, so he couldn't have used this metaphor. Paul's model is political; it was about power. Paul says that sin came in the world, and then "death exercised dominion" over the world. Death became king.

What this means is that sin and death are related the same way that our democracy and the president are related. If you live in our country, you have our president. This is dismaying to some people, but even if your protest sign says "not my president", you can't live in America in 2017 without having Donald Trump be your president. Nor can you live in the world today and not have death reign; it doesn't matter whether you chose death or not, because ours is a world with sin in it, death is structurally part of existence. The wrong powers are in charge.

How did we get here? How did we get to this place where death exercises dominion? And how is God getting us out of it? This is what Paul is writing about here. Take it out and let's look at it together. We start in verse 12: "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned." Paul's reference to the "one man" is to story of Adam, from the Adam and Eve story. You know, the one where he and Eve sin by doing the one thing God commanded them not to do, eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And we have to remember, that act was perfectly, completely sinful. There was only one thing not to do, and so when they did that one thing, that was as completely as they could possibly sin. Through Adam then, sin entered the world, and with sin came death. And it infected everyone, everywhere. Sin was highly, highly, completely, contagious.

Now, the usefulness of the story for Paul's point depends not on the story's literal historicity. If you have a hard time imagining naked Adam and naked Eve walking around the Garden in the weeks after the universe suddenly popped into being 5,000 years ago, that's ok. Adam personifies the agent through whom sin came into the world. So there was the world, without sin. And then there was the world, with sin.

Think about Bambi's forest. There was a forest, without fire. Then there were some hunters. And then there was a forest, on fire.

Adam was the hunter. And now our world is burning up with sins and passions and calamities and destruction.

Bambi didn't have to take up a cigarette habit in order to be in danger from fire. Likewise, we human beings don't have to do anything wrong to be subject to harm from sin.

Traditional theology has used the term "original sin" to describe the way that all human beings are under the power of sin. Lately though, this term has fallen on hard times, I suspect because we've lost the distinction between "sin" and "sins," and we can't really imagine babies committing sins. Surely they can't have their own culpable sins; they don't even have teeth.

Ok. But sin — the singular, original kind — isn't mine and it isn't yours. Biblically speaking, sin isn't yours any more than the chickenpox virus in your blood is yours. You may say, "I have chickenpox," but you don't mean that you're responsible for it. Guess what, you've have sin too.

To be clear, when we talk of sins, the symptoms, those can be ours in the ownership sense. There are things we do wrong that are legitimately our fault, for which we are guilty, and for which we need to confess, ask forgiveness, and repent.

Those sins are very much ours; they're just not what Paul is talking about. Paul is talking about sin, the structural thing in the world, which has power. It's an independent power at work in the world, and it will get us, most of all in death.

This is why — and this is so, so important to understand — this is why we cannot get free of sin just by "doing better." No amount of self-help, good intentions, or steeled will can do it. Our own effort cannot free us from sin's slimy grasp anymore than eating well and exercising can free us from aging and death. We can't fix ourselves spiritually anymore than we can find immortality at Whole Foods.

We need some help.

And help is what Jesus Christ did for us. Paul tells us three things about this. Skip ahead a couple of verses to verse 15 (verses 13-14 are about what sin looks like in the absence of the law). The first thing Paul tells us is that Christ's help is disproportionate to the problem at hand. "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many." Note the language there — "much more" and "abounded." So what Adam did and what Christ did are not logical opposites. This is not a white paint covering black paint sort of situation; this is like a sunlit day at noon compared to a dark closet.

There was a boy once at the water park on a hot day eating a chocolate ice cream cone. The ice cream melted all over his face, and dripped down his chin, and covered his slightly sunburned little belly. And he tried to wipe it off with a napkin,

but he couldn't get it off. It had dried all sticky upon his skin, and there was nothing he could do. So he went over to the huge tipping bucket, the one high above the play area, which filled up with thousands of gallons of water and every few minutes dumped all that water on top of gleefully screaming kids. He stood beneath it. And when the bucket tipped...oh, it much more than took care of the sticky ice cream he couldn't get off himself. Sin is sticky like that ice cream; but the grace offered to us through Jesus Christ is more than enough, much more. God will meet your sin with bracing, powerful, deluge of grace.

It this disproportionate response, verse 15 refers to two things we are given: "the grace of God" and "the free gift." The grace of God is simply God's loving power in our lives. Don't ever forget, grace is not a feeling, grace is a power, a power enables us to be and do things we would not, on our own, be capable of.

The verse 16 is about explicitly about what the "free gift" brings, but first Paul reminds us what resulted from the trespass that brought sin into the world. First, the trespass: "For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation." The logic there is pretty simple, right? This is just basic justice. The wrong was done, a judgment was made, the perpetrator was condemned. But then the free gift: "the free gift following many trespasses brings justification." This logic is not at all...logical. Instead of judgment following many trespasses, we get the free gift. The gift takes the place of the judgment that is ours. This is, in a way, unjust. We don't get from God what we earn in this life; we get from God what Christ earned his life. This is why we get justification. We may live in a world in which "death reigns" but we don't get judged like it.

Which brings us to the final thing about the effect of Christ's action compared with Adam's: it has the exact opposite final symptom. This is in verse 17. "If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one..." Remember, it was through sin — the singular, cosmic power, sin — that death reigned. Death is sin's final symptom.

The verse goes on, "...much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ." See this, through the *of grace* and *the free gift* of righteousness, we reign in life through Jesus Christ. Death's reign is over.

Verses 18 and 19 summarize the argument, and make a reference to the one man's, that is Jesus' "act of righteousness" and "obedience." What Paul is referring to is Jesus' obedience unto death on the cross. The grace and free gift that bring us life come to us through his death. And so for now at least, our life comes through death too. And, though we might very much like to avoid the death part, having life on the other side of death is way, way better than just having death.

I'll close with this: I said at the beginning that finding and understanding the problem is absolutely necessary to properly fixing it. For some reason, even though our scriptures teach us better, we get convinced — maybe especially in a season like Lent with its focus on repentance — that the problem is primarily in our sins.

You know that person in your office, or your school, or maybe even in your family, who simply won't go to the doctor? Sure, they expect you to listen to their complaints about how terrible they feel, and it's obvious to everyone with a functioning central nervous system that they have the flu, but they refuse to do anything more than address the symptoms with over the counter drugs?

Often that's us spiritually. With the best of intentions, we try to address our sins, maybe even with lots of repentance and tears and deeply held convictions that next time will be better. But we don't realize, or don't acknowledge, the power of sin. The heart of the problem here isn't what you've done, but who's in charge. Jesus is ready to kick death of its throne in your life.

Lent is a great time to acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness. But it's also a great time to remember that Jesus Christ has addressed the underlying problem, not our sins, but our sin. The grace and free gift, abundantly offered to you, are on the table today.