

“Our Sins Are Ever Before Us”: Preaching on Sin after September 11

Allen C. McSween, Jr.

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina

Sandy McKelway, a retired professor at Davidson, tells of reading a prayer of confession in the bulletin of a Presbyterian church which began, “O God, our sins are ever before us—not that we have done anything all that bad, but...” Then followed that tiresome litany of the “politically correct” failings of which the congregation was expected to feel mildly guilty.

It is easy to laugh at such theological naïveté. But in so doing I am laughing at myself. In the church I serve, we confess our sin corporately each Sunday. Yet too often it is with a good bit of self-consciousness that I use the classical language of sin in my preaching and teaching and rarely in pastoral care. In my more honest moments, I am keenly aware of my own sins and failures in discipleship, but I struggle to communicate an understanding of sin that is more than superficial moralism. For reasons both personal and professional, this paper is an attempt to engage in theological reflection on the loss of the language of sin in the church and point to resources for its recovery.

Once sin was a strong, foreboding word, with great power and drama. No other word in the English language articulated so powerfully the depths of the human dilemma. The concept of sin gave voice to the radical brokenness of life without falling into utter despair. It served to name the madness that keeps being played out in the headlines of every day’s news without cynicism or utopian fantasies.

But for a host of reasons, the stern old language of sin has fallen into disuse and disfavor. To many in “progressive” mainline churches, the word itself has a quaintness that smells of musty sanctuaries and renders its recovery problematic. Talk too much about sin in mainline Protestant pulpits, and, one way or another, the congregation will let you know they do not come to worship to be told “how bad they are.” They last thing they want for themselves or their children is to “feel guilty.” Wanting to be well-liked by those whom we care about and fearing to offend those who pay our salaries, Kathleen Norris has pointed out that we pastors “can be so reluctant to use the word ‘sin’ that in church we end up confessing nothing except our highly developed capacity for denial.”¹

But however uncomfortable we in the church may be with the word sin, our bluff has been called by events throughout the world. On September 11, 2001, “history caught up with us,” and we experienced in an emotionally powerful way what people in many parts of the world face almost daily. The “irrational exuberance” of our tremendous prosperity over the past decade had enabled us to forget or repress for a while the fact that we live in a world of vast brutalities—“ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, suicide bombers in Jerusalem and Baghdad, vicious civil war in Rwanda, an HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, and the daily death count of the ongoing war in Iraq. We live in a brutal and brutalized world where the human wreckage cries out to heaven. In such a world there can be nothing “innocent” in our loss of a theology of sin. It is a manifestation of sin itself.

It matters greatly that the concept of sin has fallen into disuse. None of the words offered in its place—estrangement, alienation, social dysfunction—carry anything like the full gravity of sin or have the weight of centuries of profound reflection and tradition behind them. Sin is the given language of scripture and Christian faith. It cannot be psychologized without loss of its most salient feature—its direct and inescapable reference to God.

To lose a profound concept of sin is to lose the ability to speak honestly and deeply about the human predicament. Yet even those who are uncomfortable with the language of sin are nevertheless keenly aware that things are not as they ought to be, and we are not as we ought to be. From whence comes this turning away from a deeply felt, if not clearly articulated, norm? Why do so many of our best intentions produce disastrous consequences? Why does there seem to be an ineradicable perversity to human life? And why do we have such a phenomenal capacity to deny it? Yes, “Our sins are ever before us...” whether they are named as such or not.

Yet still we persist in excusing or justifying them, most often by blaming other people or structures for them. That is true across the theological and political spectrum. No one I know of has dealt more profoundly with the “double dynamic” of pretended innocence and external blame than Miroslav Volf. In his stunning work, *Exclusion and Embrace*, a book that becomes more painfully relevant every day to our situation in the United States, Volf writes:

In a world so manifestly drenched with evil everybody is innocent in their own eyes.... perpetrators tirelessly generate their own innocence, and do so by the double strategy of denying the wrongdoing and re-interpreting the moral significance of their own actions. This double strategy is fertile ground for ideologies by which systems and nations seek to mask a violence and oppression they perpetrate. And this same double denial is the stuff out of which the peculiar blend of fraud and self-deception is concocted, by which individuals seek to evade being held responsible for evil-doing.¹

Across the political and theological divides, sin is largely viewed as external, societal, structural. The suggestion that *we* bear significant responsibility for the evils around us is often rejected out of hand either as a matter of “blaming the victim” or as a threat to our self-esteem, our most prized possession or most sought after virtue. On the conservative side, it is disturbing to see how many evangelicals (who clearly ought to know better) have bought into the ideology of “self-esteem” at the cost of any serious doctrine of sin.² On the liberal side, the “valorization of the victim” has nearly silenced any serious reflection on the “noninnocence of victims.”

Once again it is Volf who has the theological courage to speak a profound word about the “solidarity in sin” of perpetrator and victim without losing the capacity to render moral judgments and pursue the rightful demands of justice.

Violence ensnares the psyche of the victim, propels its action in the form of defensive reaction, and—robs it of innocence.... She (Marjorie Suchocki) writes, ‘To break the world cleanly into victims and violators ignores the depths of each person’s participation in cultural sin. There are simply no

innocents.’...In addition to inflicting harm, the practice of evil keeps re-creating a world without innocence....Intertwined through the wrongdoing committed and suffered, the victim and violator are bound in the tragic and self-perpetuating solidarity of sin.³

Volf hastens to insist that “solidarity in sin” is not a matter of seeing all sins as equal and thus undercutting rightful demands for justice. To say that “all of us are equally sinners” does not mean that “all sins are equal.” The fact that victim and violator are neither innocent does not place them morally on an equal footing. But it does join them in a powerful, yet rarely explored, solidarity. Volf insists,

There is no escape from noninnocence, either for perpetrators or the victims or for a ‘third party.’...Every person’s heart is blemished with sin; every ideal and project is infected with corruption; and every ascription of guilt and innocence is saddled with noninnocence. This, I think, is what the doctrine of original sin teaches.⁴

In seeking to recover a more profound sense of sin for pastoral ministry, we must continually insist that sin is a uniquely religious/theological concept. Understood biblically, sin is not merely an ethical concept—something we *do* that is wrong. Sin is a theological concept—naming that which betrays or breaks our relationship with God. Fleming Rutledge puts it simply: “Sin is only understood to be sin when God is understood to be God.”⁵

Sin is not defined abstractly in scripture. It is narrated concretely. We only know sin in the light of the unfolding drama of God’s will for our life together. Sin is not merely the violation of a moral code, however serious may be its consequences. Sin is the disruption of the network of covenant relationships for which we were created by God. Its inevitable result is the disruption of all our relationships with nature, others, and self.

A pastor would be ill advised to preach directly on “the doctrine of sin.” It is better to stay close to the “dense particularity” of scripture’s own “thickly textured” narration of sin. One obvious place to begin is with Genesis 2 and 3. There is debate about how much of the later Christian understanding of sin can legitimately be found in the story. Rabbinic commentary on the early chapters of Genesis does not treat it as the catastrophic “fall” portrayed in Roman Catholic and Protestant dogmatics. Nor is the story offered as an “explanation” of how sin and evil entered the world. Such speculative matters were of little concern to the narrator of Genesis. What is most significant for the community of faith is the way in which the sin of Adam and Eve in all its various aspects (disobedience, seeking to be “like God,” quest for autonomy, anxiety, seeking security apart from God, blaming the other) is portrayed essentially as a breach in their relationship to God, with the resultant brokenness of all their other relationships with each other and the created order. In a time after our own “fall from innocent invincibility” (9/11/2001), a pastor can helpfully explore with a congregation what happens when people and nations center life around their own security and well-being apart from the sustaining relationships intended by the Creator. The headlines of the daily news give abundant illustration of what happens when we seek to be our own arbiters of good and evil.

Similar reflections can be stimulated by the familiar story of David and Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). The text offers a profound reflection on sin as it finds concrete expression in the life of a man “after God’s own heart.” Here, as always in scripture, sin is not defined. It is narrated in an artful narrative that reveals sin’s insidious power in the “best and the brightest.”

Psalms 51, with its narrative backdrop of David’s escalating web of sin, offers profound theological reflection on sin and repentance. The psalm insists that sin is fundamentally against God. All sin has social consequences, yet sin, properly speaking, is essentially a theological concept. James Mays insists: “It is God and God alone whose way and will as criteria for human acts reveals them as sin... It is the divine oversight of human life that makes talk about sin meaningful and necessary. Where there is no reckoning with the oversight of God, the vocabulary of sin becomes meaningless and atrophies.”¹

It is important to note in Psalm 51 that the confession of sin seeks renewal as well as forgiveness. The psalmist trusts the creative power of God’s Holy Spirit to do that which he knows is utterly beyond his own power—to create in him a clean heart and renew a right (willing) spirit. The word “create” (*bara*) is used exclusively in the Older Testament for that which God alone can do. The psalmist does not seek to be well-adjusted to his sin. He does not ask for greater willpower in resisting sin, or for a greater sense of self-esteem. He prays for a new creation at the center of his being. The psalmist confesses his sinfulness, not out of despair or self-pity, but in the assurance through honest contrition that God will indeed recreate the human self from within.

Eugene Peterson, in his delightful book on David, *Leap Over a Wall*, points out that the psalmist uses only four words to name his sin—transgression, iniquity, sin, and bloodshed or violence. Those four “map the whole terrain of sin.” To get more specific or graphic would be to give sin too much attention. Sin, says Peterson, is basically boring. After a while, all sins are merely reruns. What is fresh and new are the varied manifestations of God’s grace to which the psalmist points with nineteen different images. Sin is the “same old—same old.” God’s grace is “fresh and new each morning.”²

We turn now very briefly to Paul’s wrestling with sin in his Letter to the Romans. At first glance it might seem that the complex theological formulations of Romans are far removed from the narrative world of the Older Testament. But that is not the case. Reflections on Genesis 2-3 play a central role in Paul’s development of sin, especially his contrast between Adam and Christ. Adam represents for Paul the whole of humanity under the power of sin. Paul develops in particular an understanding of sin both as idolatry, giving ultimately allegiance (worship) to anything other than the triune God, and as a pervasive power assaulting human life.

Staying close to the narrative and narratives of scripture keeps our understanding of sin in a covenant framework. Yet even when sin is properly understood in relational terms, we must insist that it always defies definition. “Sin” that could be understood or explained would not be Sin in the full Christian understanding of it. We have no vantage point outside of sin by which to define sin except in light of God’s revelation of our true humanity in Jesus Christ. To define sin too precisely is inevitably to trivialize it. Our definitions turn sin into specific acts (sins) which can be described and proscribed, and thus inevitably lead to various forms of legalism or moralism.

The origin of sin cannot be specified without trivializing sin’s universality. Yet we

must insist that its origin is not in bodily human life. Sin is not rooted in finitude, temporality, sexuality, ignorance, unjust social structures. “Sin posits itself” (Reinhold Niebuhr). Christian faith insists that sin is not a part of our created nature. It is a corruption of that nature. Whatever may be the origin of sin, the fact is that we are all born into a “fallen” situation in which sin is already an encompassing reality. In the words of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties—but right through every human heart.”³

Sin is not just a wrongful act. It is a state of being “curved in on oneself” (Luther). Sin is a radical, persistent self-centeredness that can never be “cured” by acts of the self-centered self, regardless of how sincerely they are intended or how nobly they are performed. The self-centered self is not free to will or to work its own liberation from its self-centeredness.

The crux of the matter has to do with how two of the more “offensive” aspects of the doctrine of sin are construed—namely, the “bondage of the will” and “total depravity.” The “bondage of the will” no doubt strikes many American churchgoers as being even more “absurd” than “original sin” (and downright un-American!). Yet if our wills are as free as many claim, why is what we freely will often so trivial, so self-centered, so vain and empty? The ideology of “freedom of choice” fails to take sufficient account of the tragic dimension in both the choices we “freely” make and those we are forced to make.

As for our “total depravity,” that “peculiar gift” of the Reformed tradition, it would seem that such an idea would undercut the whole modern enterprise with its emphasis on progress and self-liberation. Exactly! That’s the point of it! “Total depravity” does not mean that we are as evil as we could possibly be (what Albert Outler called “teetotal depravity”). It means that every human being and every aspect of human life is tainted by the radical self-centeredness of sin. Thus every program, every technique, of self-salvation, self-liberation, self-conferred self-esteem, will eventually prove empty and lead to disillusionment. Such disillusionment is not bad. The “dis-ing” of illusions can be the first and necessary step toward a rightly ordered confidence in the ultimate Giver and Redeemer of life, the triune God.

A large part of the immense subtlety of sin is seen in its ability to “morph” into a countless variety of forms. All attempts to specify a single root of sin are futile. At times sin finds expression in active self-centeredness—pride, defiance, willful disobedience. Other times, perhaps more often, it is expressed in passive self-abnegation—in weakness, passivity, banality, and triviality. At times sin is expressed in the prideful centering of life around one’s inflated self; other times in the despairing centering of life around one’s broken self. In one of his most profound insights, Augustine noted, “Many sins are committed through pride, but not all happen proudly...they happen so often by ignorance, by human weakness; many are committed by men weeping and groaning in their distress.”⁴

In articulating sin, we cannot avoid using the language of paradox. In order to do justice to the realities of life under God as revealed in scripture and experienced in our own lives and history, we must affirm at the same time that sin is both a universal human condition and a self-chosen human act. We bear a measure of personal responsibility for that which enslaves the whole human race. (In Niebuhr’s phrase, sin is “inevitable, but not necessary.”) Sin involves corruption of the individual will but

is powerfully present in social and corporate structures. Sin is made manifest in acts that are readily condemned as evil or wicked, but it is subtly at work in what is applauded as virtue, warping our self-perception and deceiving us into thinking that our virtue is greater than it really is. As Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out so often, the worst evil is often done not by obviously evil people, but by “righteous” people who do not know the limits of their righteousness. (Listen well America!) Under the universality of sin, our righteousness is never as pure or disinterested as we may suppose. Surely one of sin’s most insidious powers is its ability to turn the good we intend into the evil we despise. We of the Vietnam generation know painfully well how easily our self-righteous use of power can turn us into the very enemy we oppose—a lesson we best not forget in these days when we so willingly sacrifice large measures of freedom for small measures of security. Again Volf puts it powerfully:

We are ensnared by evil not only with full consent, but without a thought of dissent and without a sigh for deliverance. With the inner workings of our will in its hold, evil can dispense with force and rule by lure. And so, paradoxically, we feel free only in the prison house of unrecognized evil.⁵

All the paradoxes of sin flow from the central paradox at the heart of the Christian view of humanity, that we are exalted and fallen at the same time. The two must be kept in appropriate tension. In a particularly insightful development of this essential paradox, the political scientist, Glenn Tinder writes:

The fallen individual is not someone other than the exalted individual. Every human being is fallen and exalted both. This paradox is familiar to every informed Christian. Yet it is continually forgotten.... Sin is ironic. Its intention is self-exaltation; its result is self-debasement. In trying to ascend, we fall. The reason for this is not hard to understand. We are exalted by God; in declaring our independence from God, we cast ourselves down.⁶

For all the tragic depths of sin, in the final analysis the doctrine of sin is good news. There is reason for the brokenness of life and hope for its ultimate redemption. We seek to render a realistic account of the pervasiveness and perniciousness of sin in order to move toward repentance and the redemption promised in the gospel. Sin must never be taken more seriously than the grace of God. As Paul insisted, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Scripture narrates graphically the reality and deadly power of sin, but always in the wider context of the “extravagance of grace.” “God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all” (Romans 11:32). Because sin is a breach of a relationship with the One whose love will not let us go, it can never be the first or final word! Sin is unnatural, a perversion, that which God does not will and wills to destroy. Sin is parasitic on the good, and thus is inevitably self-destructive. Sin “feeds on itself.” The honest acknowledgement of sin can save us from arrogance and despair, from cynicism and utopian illusions. It can free us from the terrible burden of being responsible for everything that happens without destroying a sense of human responsibility for the good that is within our power. It saves us from being surprised when expected good has unintended consequences for evil, and from the romantic idealism that leads to despair and violence when its utopian dreams are

not readily achieved.

A more profound understanding of sin can make us more modest in our claims for ourselves and our own accomplishments so as to be more expectant of what God can and will accomplish in and through us or in spite of us. In a time of media-inflated egotism, any gain in modesty would come as a breath of fresh air.

No pastoral reflection on sin can close without a call to a more profound self-examination. If, as Andrew Delbanco says, “Evil has returned as the blamable other—who can always be counted on to spare us the exigencies of examining ourselves,”⁷ we as Christians have a counter-witness to offer. *Mea culpa*, said not in despair or resignation, but in profound trust in the Christ who “while we were yet sinners...died for us.” Serious, sustained pastoral efforts to recover a more profound understanding of sin could go a long way toward helping the church move out of its triviality and denial, so as to become virtually the only place, in a society trapped in the violent lies of its own self-righteous myths, where the truth is told and reality is faced. A more important ministry for the Church of the Risen-Crucified Christ in our time and place can hardly be imagined.

Notes

¹Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 165.

²Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 79-80.

³The most egregious example is Robert Schuller, *Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*. But a host of other examples could be given. See Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, or for a sociological critique, see James D. Hunter, *The Death of Character*.

⁴Volf, 81, 92.

⁵Volf, 84.

⁶Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 89.

⁷James L. Mays, *Psalms—Interpretation Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 199.

⁸Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998), 190.

⁹Quoted in Paul Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977, reprinted 1998), 127.

¹⁰From *Nature and Grace*, xxix, quoted by John Leith in sermon given at the 165th annual session of the Synod of NC, Charlotte, NC, June 6, 1978.

¹¹Volf, 90.

¹²Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 35-44. Tinder goes on to say, “Our exaltation depends on the mercy of God, who is not a being in the world, and is reflected in destinies that lead us beyond our world. Exponents of worldly philosophies, denying God and unconscious of destiny, move back and forth between two contrasting misunderstandings. Trying to maintain the dignity of human beings, they affirm their goodness; that is the only possible source, for them, of their dignity. When they discover that most human beings display little goodness, they are forced to question their dignity. Thus, they fluctuate between complacency and cynicism. Only those conscious that the world is transcended, and that our lives in the world lead beyond the world, can say that a human being is morally perverse yet of measureless value, fallen yet sacred.”

¹³Andrew Delbanco, *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995), 234.