

What's More Original Than Sin?

Genesis 1:26-28a; 3:6, 8-11, 22-24; Romans 5:12, 15-21

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Series Overview:

“What’s More Original Than Sin?” was preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Greenville, South Carolina, on August 15, 2021, as the first of a three-part series, “The Good News About Sin.” Guided throughout by Douglas F. Ottati’s *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, a general overview of the series is as follows:

“What’s More Original Than Sin?” explores the doctrine of original sin as understood within the context of humanity’s original created goodness in the image of the God of grace. The good news that we belong to the God of grace gives us courage to take a close, honest look at our sin.

“So Much Sin! All You Need Is Love?” examines the multifaceted nature of sin as the contraction of the human heart, mind, and will that results from human wounds and anxieties. The Spirit’s assurance of God’s love frees us to open our minds, hearts, and hands to respond with greater love toward the neighbor, stranger, and enemy.

“Structural Sin and Hopeful Realism” considers the ways sin is more than an individual and personal reality, but is also social, systemic, structural, and institutional. Taking structural racism as an example, as imposed through housing segregation in America, the sermon examines how a realistic notion of sin calls for responsible structures that restrain sinful human tendencies.

For better or worse, much of what we Presbyterians have believed and taught about the Christian faith has emerged from John Calvin, the 16th century Reformer who grounded much of his theology in the writings of Augustine of Hippo, who lived and wrote at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries.

This sermon series will seek to benefit from the better and offer some alternatives to the worse. And of course, I won’t be judging the better and the worse on my own, but will be sharing my gleanings from Reformed theologians of the 20th and 21st centuries who offer interpretations of Augustine and Calvin for the modern church. As we get started talking about sin, at the front of my mind is the frequent exhortation of our friend and elder at Fourth, the late David Quattlebaum: “Pastor, preach the gospel!” So perhaps the first thing to say is that if it were not for the Good News of Jesus Christ, I would not have the courage to stand before you and preach about human sin. And the converse is true. If we did not have a very thoroughgoing conviction about the sinfulness of humanity, there would be no need for the Christian Gospel in the first place.

But in fact we desperately need the Gospel of Jesus Christ because we are desperately aware that we human beings have a propensity to mess things up for ourselves and for the rest of God’s creation. When we read the news and experience life in our communities, in our families, and in our own bodies and minds, we encounter firsthand the broken and desperate condition that led Calvin to look at the human race

and describe us with the words “total depravity.”

This human condition seems to be consistent in every age. I am currently reading a history of the two decades leading up to World War I (1890-1914), and it is remarkable how the social and political dynamics of that day, around the globe, from the angry mobs frothing at the mouth to the corruption and class warfare, sound very much like what we see in the news today. There seems to be very little evidence for any simplistic notion of human moral progress from then until now. That’s not to say there haven’t been any moral victories, but for every hard won victory, our human proclivity for evil is lurking in the shadows or masquerading as an angel of light. But so we should expect if we have been paying any attention to the gospel we proclaim. A few chapters prior to our Romans reading for today, Paul writes that *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.

The turn into this century is no different in terms of the human moral condition than the turn into the last century, and no different than the turn into the 16th century of Calvin’s day or the fourth century of Augustine’s or the first century of Jesus’, or any of the centuries before that. We may have new technologies and more sophisticated cultures in some ways, less sophisticated in other ways, but the fundamental human *moral* condition has not progressed.

This brings us to the title of this first sermon, “What’s More Original Than Sin?” When we look at the history of the human race, the relentless repetition of our hideous moral failings century after warring century makes a strong case for our theological claim that our sinful condition flows from something original, something that has always infected the human species and, it seems, always will. The evidence points to the depressing conclusion that if there is anything the human species can claim as our own original achievement, it is our ability to take something beautiful and promptly ruin it.

Now, to bring this gloomy reflection down to the ground level where we live, we don’t have to go any further than our own minds, hearts, and bodies to know that the humans are broken. Theologian Shirley Guthrie entitled his chapter on the doctrine of sin “Why Don’t You Just Be Yourself?” and begins with a series of typical sayings, such as:

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. I’m just not myself”

“She’s not really a bad girl. She’s just trying to find herself.”

“Why don’t you stop pretending you are something you aren’t and just be yourself.”

“He’s not even human; he’s just an animal.”

“That guy thinks he’s God Almighty.”¹

These typical sayings bring to light the self-contradictions that can make life so hard to understand: “Trying to ‘find’ or ‘be’ or ‘get hold of’ myself is admitting the illogical but true predicament we are all in: I am somehow separated from my inmost, truest self.”² But in that little notion, that little inkling—that when we think, or speak, or act in ugly or hateful ways, or even just in thoughtless or self-serving ways, that we are not being who we truly are, or that we are somehow alienated from our truest

selves—in that notion, we begin to arrive at “The Good News About Sin.”

That’s because the answer of the Christian faith to the question “what’s more original than sin?” is that there is, in fact, something more original than sin, something more deeply true about the human race, and we have read about that deeper reality in Genesis: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them....”

What’s more original than sin in humanity? The image of God in us is more original than sin! Before we all were sinners, we were created in the image of God. In the Genesis story, things happen in chronological sequence: creation in the image of God, then the fall from created goodness. But whether or not we think in terms of literal chronology or some literal time when humans were not sinners (and you don’t have to be literal about the timing)—either way, the theological point is about the fundamental nature of being human.

We are, in our truest selves, creatures created in the image of God. And God calls the creation good. Again and again God sees all that God has made, and God saw that it was very good. *What’s more original than sin? Our created goodness is more original. The image of God in us.* So Shirley Guthrie writes,

We must take sin very seriously, but not too seriously....The basic truth is not that we are sinners but that we are human beings created in God’s image. Sin distorts, twists, corrupts, and contradicts this truth, but it does not change us into something other than what God created us to be.³

To emphasize this point, Reformed Theologian Doug Ottati observes,

The ecumenical creeds contain no article dedicated to sin. Indeed, describing the work of the Spirit in the third article, the Apostles’ Creed mentions “the forgiveness of sins,” and the Nicene Creed mentions “one baptism for the remission of sins.” ... “Sin, that is to say, goes together with grace....”⁴

Sin is always and only understood within the wider context of grace. So to the question “What’s more original than sin?” the creeds would answer, “Grace is more original than sin.”

Or as we used to sing in the old hymn, “Wonderful grace of Jesus, greater than all my sin....” God is the God of grace. We belong to the God of grace. We are created in the image of the God of grace.

In Romans 5, Paul declares this truth. In the event of Jesus Christ, God shows that God’s grace overcomes our alienation—alienation from God and from our true selves—and reverses our degenerative condition.⁵ The point of Romans 5 is not that we were originally sinful, but that, through the sin of Adam, our original goodness became corrupted. Or as Calvin wrote, “Sin is not our nature, but its derangement.” So the story of Adam becomes the story of all humanity. The story of Adam teaches that all humanity has “a perverse disposition..., [that] people are plagued by a persistent fault...and are...other than they were created to be.”⁶ *But the good news about sin is that sin never completely obliterates our created goodness. And the free gift of the God, made known in Jesus Christ, is the restoration of our original created*

goodness. *Our true self is always there for Christ to redeem.* “Adam and Christ are opposite, but not equal.... They are not equal because what Christ does is so much greater than what Adam does.”⁷

This gospel assurance does several good things for us. For one thing, as Richard Rohr reminds us, the doctrine of original sin teaches us “not to be surprised at the frailty and woundedness that we all carry.”⁸ That is to say, the doctrine of sin helps us to be more realistic about what to expect from human beings and from human families, human communities, human organizations.

So what can we expect? According to Augustine and the Reformers, we expect at least three things: that sin is *radical, universal, and multifaceted*.⁹ Sin is *radical* in the sense of the Latin word *radix*, which means “root.” Sin finds itself all the way to the very root, to the very core, of human life. We can expect “that no aspect of human life is exempted from sin’s effects.” It is not the case “that only the emotions and passions are disordered and that our reasoning capacity can be trusted to hold them in check.... Neither is it the case that only our reasoning is distorted, and that our deepest affections or our hearts remain reliable guides.”¹⁰ No, sin corrupts all of it—our mind and heart and will.

Even so, because our true nature still remains—that is, the image of God within us—sin does not utterly destroy our human capacities and powers as though “we are unable to accomplish anything of value and significance.”¹¹ Even though Calvin taught our total depravity, our radical sinfulness, he still recognized that we retain impressive abilities in learning in the arts and sciences, in the ability to love and build strong friendships, and to retain a basic sense of fairness and justice. These things are evidence that God’s grace continues to be at work in us even though sin taints everything.

In addition to being radical, we expect that “sin’s radical corruption is also *universal*. No person or aspect of society is exempted from sin’s effects.” No nation, no government, no party, no school, and not even the church. This does not mean that our social and institutional life is utterly hopeless or that no good can ever come of our working together. Great good can be accomplished when we work together, but no human gathering or organization is ever sin-free, and none should be exempted from careful critique.

Moreover, we expect sin to be *multifaceted*. The many ways sin is at work in human life will be the subject of next week’s sermon. To say sin is radical, universal, and multifaceted is not pessimistic, but realistic. And we are given the courage to be realistic because we always examine our sin in the wider context of God’s enduring grace.

Finally, the doctrine of sin—especially the doctrine of Original Sin—is a merciful teaching: it means we are all in this together. As Richard Rohr encourages us, “Knowledge of our shared wound ought to free us from the burden of unnecessary...guilt or shame, and help us to be forgiving and compassionate with ourselves and one another.”¹²

The doctrine of sin teaches us that
We are all, together, utterly reliant on the wideness of God's mercy.
We are all, together, utterly dependent on the
 "wonderful grace of Jesus, greater than all my sin."
We can all rejoice, together, that there is nothing in life or in death
 that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

There is more to say about all our sin, and we will say more in the coming weeks. But all we might say about our sin, we always say within the context of the great assurance of God's grace. For when all is said and done, the Christian gospel proclaims good news about sin, namely, that it is not sin, but God's grace, that is the first and the last word about us.

Notes

1 Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine, Revised Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 212.

2 Ibid.

3 Guthrie, 213.

4 Douglas F. Ottati, *A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 543.

5 Ottati, 544.

6 Ottati, 545-546.

7 David L. Bartlett, *Romans* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 58.

8 Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 62.

9 Ottati brings this forward in his Proposition #59, "Sin's corruption is multifaceted, radical, and universal," 553.

10 Ottati, 556.

11 Ibid.

12 Rohr, 62.