

I hope you were intrigued by the sermon title this morning. As I said in our Friday email, if that title doesn't get your attention, I don't know what would! It's taken from a book called Speaking of Sin written by one of my favorite preacher/teachers, the Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor. Here is the full sentence: "Sin is our only hope, because the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again."

Our text for this Sunday, taken from 1st John, is a passage that spends a great deal of time not only speaking of sin, but also of the human tendency to stumble around, unable to see, because of it. It's a passage that raises important questions about what we actually think sin is, and how we might respond when something is wrong and in need of repair or transformation.

Rev. Taylor insists that "There is no help for those who admit no need of help. There is no repair for those who insist that nothing is broken, and there is no hope of transformation for a world whose inhabitants accept that it is sadly but irreversibly wrecked." Taylor, and the author of 1st John, seem to echo one another. Both are clearly saying that our only hope, individually and corporately, is in acknowledging the reality of sin in the world and seeking to do something about it.

The danger, of course, is that too many people want only to acknowledge the sin of others. And those same folks typically claim to be the authority on what constitutes sin. Some of this is due to how the church has historically talked about the subject. Augustine (NOT JESUS) gave us the concept of Original Sin which sets us all up for failure from the very beginning. And the widespread influence of a very old narrative poem, called Dante's Divine Comedy, deeply ingrained certain imagery and themes into Western culture. Dante's 9 circles of hell, and his concepts of sin, punishment, and divine justice have been used to reinforce *dominant* cultural norms and values for centuries.

The church has used these references to talk about sin for a long time. The Bible does offer us both legal and medical models for understanding sin. It's frequently described as either a sickness that needs healing, or a failure to obey divine law which leads to punishment. From these perspectives the church is either a clinic or a courtroom. But there are other models, just as Biblically sound. *Jesus was himself much less concerned with specific behaviors than he was with the aftermath of those behaviors.* And so we see descriptions of sin as that which alienates us from the source of life, or any experience that makes part of us die inside.

I'm currently enrolled in an online course taught by Father Richard Rohr, and just this week I read this statement of his. Rohr says that "We aren't punished for our sins...We're punished by our sins." We suffer as a result of our own attitudes and actions.

Oscar Wilde wrote a novel called The Picture of Dorian Gray that depicts this truth in vivid detail.

- In his story, a young man named Dorian has his portrait painted by a talented artist.
- Through a combination of his own desire and the mysterious influence of the portrait itself, Dorian is somehow granted a supernatural capability to never age.
- At first he simply wants to stay young and beautiful, but he very quickly discovers that this supernatural capability allows him to get away with all sorts of behavior while never suffering the consequences. He becomes immersed in a life of unbridled self-interest, violence and even murder. And while he lives this increasingly callous, selfish life, devoid of empathy, he himself

remains youthful and physically unchanged, but his portrait ages and decays reflecting the corruption of his soul.

- As Dorian's actions become more and more wicked, and his soul becomes more corrupted, the portrait gradually takes on a grotesque and sinister appearance.
- It becomes a reflection of the true state of his inner being, showing the effects of his behavior and the toll it has taken on his life.
- But nevertheless, Dorian refuses to take responsibility for his actions. He hides his shadow self within the portrait.
- He becomes haunted by the hideous image, until he cannot take it any longer and so destroys the painting effectively destroying himself.

Those who think of Jesus as a high-powered lawyer who can advocate on our behalf and get us out of trouble without any consequences are mistaken. We ARE punished BY our sins, and our full, and honest participation, is required for forgiveness to be complete between us and God. To be forgiven by God we must take responsibility as individuals, as a nation, and as a world community, for any falseness that we have done

and any moments when we have been untrue to others. We each have our own shadow selves that only we can confront, and our world is full of examples of unbridled self-interest, violence and even murder.

Because of grace, God does not respond with punitive action in response to our sin. The Gospel approach is closer to that of the Restorative Justice movement. The Gospel approach asks “what harm has been done, what is needed to repair that harm, and who is responsible for repairing it?” The Gospel approach invites openness, dialogue and transformation.

I quote Rev. Taylor here again with her suggestion that “The church exists so that people have a community in which they may confess their sin - their own turning away from life, whatever form that destructiveness may take for them - as well as a community that will support them to turn back again.

The church exists” says Taylor “so that people have a place where they may repent of their fear, their hardness of heart, their isolation and loss of vision, and where - having repented - they may be restored to fullness of life. ***May we live into this expression of the Beloved Community. May we be, and build, a world where all of life is honored and held with grace. May we work toward the restoration of the fullness of life wherever and whenever it is thwarted. Amen.***