

SERMON, 1st in Lent, March 10, 2019

Are we sinful souls, needing redemption?

Or merely incomplete souls, on our way to self-actualization?

The overarching goal of our Christian faith is for people to be rightly connected to God and to each other as God's beloved children. In order to embrace that, we need to see our souls and our lives truly, as God sees them. When we look with God's eyes, we see richer possibilities and brighter horizons; we discover courage to become better than we are. We also see old debris, unhelpful patterns, broken down places in our psyches, weak and immature parts of our personalities, underdeveloped parts of our characters.

The Scottish poet, Robert Burns put it well when he wrote, "My life reminded me of a ruined temple. What strength, what proportion in some parts! What unsightly gaps, what prostrate ruins in others!"

I believe that we--well-educated members of the Episcopal Church in New England in the 21st century—may experience a kind of reflexive skepticism whenever we hear the words, "sin, repentance, and salvation." Out mainstream culture—which obviously influences us in everything we read, watch, or listen to--has, for the most part, abandoned these terms. Sin has been replaced by terms like "anti-social," or "maladaptive." Repentance is superseded by "values clarification." And instead of salvation... "self-actualization" may be the highest value in the secular lexicon for achieving the good life. These secular terms are useful and descriptive. They aren't evil concepts. The most obvious distinction between the classical, faith-based terms and our contemporary, secular terms is the absence of any reference to God.

Google Books has a new search device for those of us who are fascinated by language and ideas. It shows the relative frequency of the use of a word in American culture from the year, 1800 to 2000.

For an example of how this works, I entered three terms: "sin," "antisocial," and "values clarification." The program immediately tells me how frequently these words appear in books that have been digitized by Google. As you might expect, the relative frequency of use of these words is inversely proportional. The more widely the concepts of "antisocial behavior" and "values clarification" are used in American culture, the less widely the concept of "sin" is used.

A side note to the classics students among us: Do we really believe that Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato, Socrates; or Seneca or Marcus Aurelius-- let alone Moses, Isaiah, or Jesus--when they spoke of virtue and vice, all had a defective sense of the inner landscape of the human soul?

The words, "sin," and "virtue" were both used about six times as often in print (.0160%) in the early 1800s as they has been from 1970 to our own day. It's use in all American publications peaks around 1830, at the height of a Christian religious revival in America called the "Second Great Awakening." Preachers like Charles Finney were encouraging spiritual conversion to faith in Christ. Finney was the President of Oberlin College in Ohio from 1849 to 1866. During that

period of his leadership, the college was among the first in the nation to admit blacks and women in the student body, in addition to white men.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Grandison_Finney#Antislavery_work_and_Oberlin_College_presidency]

Our secular culture, retrospectively, tends to regard these converts and followers of this passionate preaching of the classical Christian faith as emotionally overwrought folks who were duped by Christian fundamentalism. Our same contemporary critics conveniently overlook that these converts to the Christian faith were what we would call today the best educated, enlightened, **Progressive Voice** in American culture. 106 of the first 108 colleges founded in America were established primarily to teach and to promote the Christian faith. Schools like Amherst College were founded with mission statements along these lines: "for the classical education of indigent young men of piety and talents for the Christian ministry." Nearly all the Ivy League schools were founded by leaders with an avowed Christian purpose. Harvard and Yale both had Congregational ministers in view. Dartmouth College, founded by Eleazar Wheelock, a Congregational minister from Connecticut, sought to establish a school to train Native Americans as Christian missionaries. Wellesley College was founded in 1875 by Henry and Pauline Durant, both evangelical Christians and friends of Dwight Moody, who served as an early trustee. Henry Durant, in his opening address to the college, said that "the Higher Education of Women is one of the great world battle cries for freedom... I believe that God's hand is in it." His wife Pauline placed a leather Bible in one cornerstone of the first building erected on campus. On the fly-leaf of that Bible, she had written: *"This building is humbly dedicated to our Heavenly Father with the hope and prayer that He may always be first in everything in this institution; that His word may be faithfully taught here; and that He will use it as a means of leading precious souls to the Lord Jesus Christ...."*

And all these spiritually renewed Christian souls were dedicating themselves to various social reforms. These included the abolition of slavery, expanded education, prison reform, temperance, Sabbath observance, and the promotion of women's rights. At Yale University, the President, Timothy Dwight, preached a weekly series on Christian belief over a period of seven years. ***In 1901, "one college tutor wrote home to his mom, "Yale College is a little temple; prayer and praise seem to be the delight of the greater part of the students, while those who are still unfeeling are awed with respectful silence."***

[<http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/the-2nd-great-awakening-11630336.html>]

People who **repented** (reconsidered where their lives were going; turned decisively to connect spiritually with God; and trusted in Jesus Christ to enable that renewal) didn't just huddle up in their own feel-good, "Kum By Yah" circles. They became the most active agents for improving the quality of life for everyone, and especially for those on the margins.

Close to 1970, the phrase “values clarification” is introduced to the popular lexicon, and its use spikes dramatically for a decade. The term “antisocial,” effectively replaces the term, “sin” in describing bad behavior over the period from 1900 to 2000. During this same period of time, participation in mainstream churches has declined pretty consistently.

So what’s the point, Mr. Student of the Dictionary Preacher?

The Biblical faith expressed in Judaism and in Christianity frames our central human dilemma as one of estrangement from our true source and our best advocate. In ancient, figurative language, we understand our most central challenge as finding our way back to God--from alienation, estrangement, and autonomy--into fellowship with the One who brought us into being. We seek to reconnect with the One who loves us and serves us with an incomprehensible, invincible good will. That whole complex of estrangement, alienation, and autonomy, and all the ill effects that come from that state, is encompassed in our faith narrative by the word, “sin.” Sin is all that separates and isolates us from God, and from the goodness God would bring to us. Sin is a nasty, deceptive, self-defeating power.

We understand ourselves as stuck in a confusing place. On the one hand, we have a glimmer of what it means to love; to experience joy and peace; to grow in wisdom and to develop a refined character that can consistently and courageously choose The Good. And on the other hand, every one of us knows how we are perpetually drawn toward grabbing what is cheap, half-baked, or quick-and-easy. We’re enticed to the immediate gratification of appetites that we acknowledge—in our clearer-thinking moments--are neither moderate nor trustworthy. Our faith narrative calls that dynamic “**temptation.**” Even Jesus experiences this tension, and the challenge to choose and act faithfully.

I don’t know about you, but for me, sin and temptation are not archaic, outdated, and useless concepts. They are profoundly accurate and insightful images of the ways our human psyches work. They provide us with accurate and useful maps of the invisible, inner terrain of our minds, hearts, and wills, and of that mysterious realm we call the Spirit.

Most critically, and most wonderfully, the same Biblical faith narrative explains to us that there is a way through, and ultimately ***a way out of this estrangement and struggle.*** The ancient terms we use for that victory are “**redemption**” and “**salvation.**”

It shouldn’t surprise us that the frequency of the use of the words, “redemption” and “salvation” in American culture track right alongside that of the word, “sin.” Where there is no perceived malady of sin, there is no recognition of the cure of the redemption that saves us.

Our Biblical faith narrative has, as its peak and culmination, this deliverance from the power and effects of evil. Jesus is our critical link to our restored fellowship and spiritual life with God. Through Jesus’ love, spiritual direction, sacrifice on the cross, and resurrection, we can press on through the murky realms of sin and temptation. We can be freed from self-defeating patterns

and habits. We can be restored in right relationship with God and with one another. In the classical language of faith, ***“we have been saved; we are being saved; we shall be saved.”***

Like every true and worthy leader, Jesus only and always calls us to follow where he has already led the way. I like the JB Phillips paraphrase of Hebrews 4:15 ***“For we have no superhuman High Priest to whom our weaknesses are unintelligible—he himself has shared fully in all our experience of temptation, except that he never sinned.”***

The writer continues, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with fullest confidence, that we may receive mercy for our failures and grace to help in the hour of need.”

As you begin this spiritual journey through this season of Lent, don’t be guilty of chronologically snobbery. That is, don’t look dismissively on ancient religious wisdom and concepts simply because they didn’t originate in last week’s contemporary think tank. Consider this beautiful invitation to life in Christ as God’s supreme, universal, and timeless truth. Let’s all join our lives with Christ’s. Consider this spiritual union one of the most important facts of life, one that time has tried, and proven strong, and good, and true. ***Amen.***