

Sunday, February 09, 2025
The Fifth Sunday After The Epiphany

Festal Eucharist
11:00 am

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Preston Gonzalez-Grissom
on
Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13); Luke 5:1-11
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Should We Still Talk About Sin?

I must begin with a confession—I am not a very good fisherman. I wish I was. I try to be. Perhaps stereotypically, every man in my family is a good fisherman. But, I am not a good fisherman.

And the last thing a bad fisherman wants to hear from another fisherman is: “Did you catch anything?”

Jesus asks this exact question to some fishermen in our Gospel reading.

After teaching, he asks them—seemingly in front of a large crowd—”Did you catch anything?” Do you know how humble you have to be, to be a professional fisherman and admit, in front of a crowd, you caught no fish?

To add on, Jesus gives them advice, telling them to drop their nets in the deep water. “Thanks, Jesus, hadn’t thought of that.”

But they do it anyway, and they catch so many fish they have to divide them between two boats and they begin to sink. So Simon Peter falls down at Jesus’ knees: “Away from me, for I am a sinful man.” And then, he leaves everything.

A bit of a dramatic reaction... but it must’ve been a lot of fish.

Peter isn’t alone in reacting this way. Our readings this morning give us three major figures, each coming off as a bit self-deprecating.

Pau, not known to lack self-confidence, says he is the least of the apostles, the least worthy. Isaiah catches a vision of God and says, “Woe is me! I am undone! I am a man of unclean lips, from a people of unclean lips.” Scholars aren’t sure what the phrase “unclean lips” means. It doesn’t show up anywhere else in the Old Testament and is not a well-known phrase elsewhere. Most believe it is a way to say, “I am not worthy to be in Your presence. I will die.”

And with Peter’s “I am a sinful man, away from me,” we see a common theme.

They lead me to ask a question I bet you have heard before, though maybe in another context: Are these men...okay?

If we were to meet God in a close, intimate way, as these men did, wouldn't we feel God's kindness, God's warmth, God's love? Well, these texts, especially Isaiah, make us question what we think about God, and maybe even what we think about love.

Coming this close seems to be exposing, like a mirror reflecting all imperfections. Maybe that is why we would rather keep God at a distance—keep our questions or doubts unexplored. Be close enough to feel some warmth but not too close that we may get burned by the perfecting fire.

Perhaps we keep our distance, especially if an intimate encounter with God challenges views we have about ourselves.

Certainly, modern New Yorkers—insightful as we are—are aware that thinking of oneself as a sinful person (as Simon Peter does) can be unhealthy, maybe even primitive, and shame-inducing.

Hasn't the Church talked enough about sin over the years? Isn't it too restricting? There is reason to be wary.

Talking about sin does risk people feeling ashamed. Some are on guard, even now, by the mere mention of the word *sin*. Maybe you've been singled out as *particularly* sinful people. There are good reasons to be careful in talking about sin.

But we do need to talk about it.

For one, I don't know about you, but I am not willing to release the power to name sin over to others: to tell us what is good and evil, what God loves and doesn't love, what is Christian and what is not.

But naming sin can be complicated work.

Sarah Coakley, who recently visited, says that we are not given a comprehensive *definition* of sin. You may have heard sin is "missing the mark," which is true, but it is not very descriptive. Rather than receiving a comprehensive definition, are given narratives—stories about people who fall into sin.¹ The story we tell about sin matters.

Though it can be complicated, there are some wise guidelines: The Holy Spirit convicts of sins—particular sins done or good that was not done. The Accuser, as it is sometimes called, speaks generally: "You are bad. You are unlovable." Any self-reflective person knows this can get complicated. Shame is inevitable and sometimes a helpful emotion. Sometimes sin and shame get entangled. I have committed sins; I am a sinner. I have done bad things; that does not make me bad.

It can be complicated work. But when we bow out of the complicated work of naming sin, we do not escape the clutches of sin. It seems we do not even usually stop talking about sin—we just stop talking about *our* sins.

I once talked to a forensic psychologist. His job is, among other things, to provide testimony in cases where the defendant is alleged to have done horrific things.

He does interviews, studies brain scans, and looks right into the darkest parts of humanity to ask what might cause someone to do something so terrible. It was a hard job, but it made him a fascinating dinner guest.

I asked him about the hardest part of his job. He said, “It messes with your sense of right and wrong. Spend enough time looking at horrible evil, and suddenly, losing your temper at your kid doesn’t seem so bad.”

When we focus only on others’ sins, we lose sight of our own. We lower the bar for ourselves.

Maybe you are struggling to see your own, the things you have done. Maybe we are suffering from sins of omission—the things the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, but we leave undone.

Maybe we are fine, like the crowd following Jesus to the beach—happy to listen, but when he calls us further, when Jesus invites us into something deeper, we would rather go home. I wonder if those people on the beach knew what they missed out on. If they had silent regrets.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says that when we do not own up to our sins, it is like they live inside of us. Left unsaid, we create little prisons inside of ourselves where nothing can get in or out.²

Confessing those sins and offering them to God is a good place to start. Because we are only freed from our sins when God takes them from us. Christians have a word for our role in this exchange: it is called confession.

And the Church helps us with this every week. We confess our sins against God and our neighbor. Not so we can wallow in them or let them harden into shame, but so that we can be freed from them—brought back from the isolating prison of sin into freedom.

The truth is, we need freedom from the guilt and shame that sin causes. In the Christian community, guilt is freed by forgiveness, and shame is freed by welcome. And we have been given ways to be free from both.

In the Book of Common Prayer, the liturgy for the Sacrament of Confession is not called Confession—it is titled the Rite of Reconciliation.³ Here we are reminded we are reconciled to God and each other in Jesus. Pronounced forgiven and welcomed back to the community.

In confession, we remember that our sins are not the most important thing about us. As the Apostle Paul writes: “I pass on to you what is of *most importance*—that Christ died for our sins.” He takes them.

So, what are you holding onto?

Jesus says, “Do not be afraid. Follow me.” Will you?
