

Dealing with Sin

Ps 14 and Romans 3:21-30 – Sermon Text = Rom 3:22b-24

625, 626, 636 (sung to 742), and 634

*For there is no distinction,
since all have sinned
and fallen short of the glory of God;
they are now justified by his grace as a gift,
through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ...*

(Romans 3:22b-24)

Kim Cross is a good friend of Jill's former business partner,
the woman I call 'the other Gill.'
He lives now in England,
where he is managing director of a publishing house,
active in his local Anglican parish,
and just elected to the town council.

He was converted to Christianity while living in Vancouver
by the ministry of Michael Green, who was then teaching at Regent College.

Kim and I had heard a lot about each other,
but first met a couple of weeks ago when he was visiting here.
We had a fascinating conversation
about the way evil shows up in our lives.

Kim believes strongly in the reality of the Devil and his demons.
He grounds this conviction in the fact that Jesus dealt directly with the Devil
and cast our demons in his ministry.

I suggested that the imagery of the Devil and his demons
was one of many ways that the Bible talks about evil and sin,
but certainly not the only way.
In the many voices of Scripture,
there are many ways of imagining
the ways evil and sin show up in our lives.

We finished our conversation
by agreeing to continue to ponder these matters together.

The same week Kim and I had that conversation,
I was reading a book recommended by my friend, David Crawford.
David is a former student and a United Church minister in Alberta.

About eight months ago, I posted a question on Facebook,
asking friends to suggest classics on Christianity
written in the twentieth century.

David suggested Frederick Buechner's *The Hungering Dark* (1969),
a collection of his reflections and prayers.

Buechner imagines evil and sin manifesting themselves
in a darkness that blinds us to the presence and power of God.

Yet, in the midst of that darkness and blindness, we still feel a hunger
for the gifts of grace that God offers in Jesus Christ.

Something is missing.

We find it only in our encounter with Jesus Christ.

In him, a redemptive light shines in and on the world
that brings about a radically different way of
that cannot be extinguished.

It's that light we remember every Sunday
when we light the Christ candle as we gather to worship together.

It's the light of the glory or energy of God,
a gift that comes to the whole of creation in and through Jesus Christ.

The same week I had the conversation with Kim,
and was reading Buechner's take on the darkneses in our lives,
I ran across a TED Talk on addiction by British journalist Johann Hari
entitled "Everything you think you know about addiction is wrong."
Drawing on the research of a couple of Vancouver doctors, among many others,
he argues that addictions are a response to loneliness,
a way of dealing with the separation and lack of connection
that happens so frequently in a judgemental, shaming, and retributive society.

The face of such social shunning,
we turn to easy, but ultimately false, sources
of security, affection, and power.

What is needed to overcome addiction
is a supportive, forgiving, and restorative community
in which a person becomes a valued contributor
to a purpose bigger than themselves.

For many of my friends who have suffered from addictions,
their recovery of the resilience to flourish
has involved some form of twelve-step program like Alcoholics Anonymous.

This is a bit of an aside, but an important observation, I think,
as we enter into the process of reconsidering our denomination's
understanding of human sexuality and sexual orientation.

Can you see the pattern of pondering that was at work for me
over the past couple of weeks?

The Holy Spirit sowed a question within me
about the meaning and dynamics of sin and evil.

That question drew my attention to conversations and insights that I might have passed by in the normal routine of things. I might have simply changed the subject when Kim brought up the Devil and demons. I might have chosen another of the books suggested by friends as Christian classics of the twentieth century. (By the way, I'm working at reading one of these every month and posting a short review of the book on our website on the Brian's Book of the Month page in the Learning menu.) I might not have clicked through to Hari's TED Talk when I found it posted on Facebook. And these very diverse experiences might not have come together as they have in this sermon on Paul's approach to dealing with sin. This is how the Spirit works in our lives to bring about the grace-filled transformations that shape our redemption.



Today's painting of Paul comes from the brush of Philippe de Champaigne, a baroque painter of the 1600s known for capturing a person's essence in the expression of their face.

For me, in this portrait of Paul, Champaigne caught his confidence in God's gift of redemption amidst the pain and frustration of a busy and beleaguered life. It is the light shining on and from Paul's face that displays this assurance in God's presence and power as it is revealed to the world in Jesus Christ. Jesus, in Paul's faith, is God's way of dealing with sin, God's gracious gift of redemption for the whole creation. Through Jesus, we are all saved for a flourishing life in community. It matters little whether you see the resistance to that gift as the Devil, or demons, or darkness, or addiction. What does matter is that you see and delight in the gift of God's grace that redeems us to flourish fully.

Paul image of sin and evil in our text this morning
adds another dimension to our growing lists of ways to see this matter.
For Paul in this section of his letter to the Romans,
it has to do with “falling short of the glory of God.”
And it is something we all share responsibility for.
You can’t blame it on the Devil or demons.
We must take our share of responsibility for not aligning ourselves with
and being in sync with the energy of God’s love.
That, as we’ve often said before, is what the Bible means by ‘the glory of God’ –
the light generated by the energy of God’s love.

So, for Paul, it is God who deals with sin, first and foremost.
He simply, and profoundly, and finally, forgives it.
In Jesus Christ, the power of sin and evil,
however you understand that force in your life,
is broken and defeated.
All have been ‘justified’ by Jesus Christ –
no conditions and no limits.
We will dig further into what Paul meant by ‘justification’ in a couple of weeks,
but, for now, let’s just remember that this is covenant language
that describes how God is putting the world right
by restoring his justice and order in the whole cosmos.
Jesus’ reign of justice, peace, and beauty is the glory God has restored
and is finishing off.

Finally, then, the key challenge for us is how we respond to this gift of grace.
The invitation is to accept it and enjoy it – no conditions and no limits.
Just as you are, just as I am, just as we are,
wake up and see the light of the glory of God
filling you and shining through you.
In gratitude, out of gratitude,
let that little light, which is really part of *the* cosmic light,
shine in you and through you.
Rejoice that God has dealt with sin – past tense –
in ways and at depths that you cannot yet imagine
so that all of humanity will never be separated from or lose our connection with
the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

To be redeemed is to be guided by the Spirit into seeing things differently.
At the core of that difference, for Christians,
is to see the power of God’s love at work in the world
and join that work with all of our beings – instincts, emotions, and intellect.

That’s how God deals with sin and evil –
by forgiving his beloved creation and restoring its original blessing.