

Easter Reflections on Sin, 2014

Are there others besides me who are troubled by the words “sin” and “sinner”? When I hear the word sin or sinner I think of a vile act or an evil person. Surely those terms don't apply to me, or any of the other good people I know. What follows is my effort to look more deeply into and think through the meaning of these terms.

What is sin?

Everyone thinks of sin in his or her own way. Here are a few “definitions” of sin I have gathered over the years of pondering this issue:

- Man's inhumanity to man (and Nature and any living being)
- Alienation, separation, estrangement from God, each other, ourselves
- Failure to love
- Anything not done from love
- “Missing the mark” (Hamartia in Greek); Not hitting the bull's eye; Errors in judgment; A mistake.
- “Turning away from God. (Merton)
- “Sin is disobedience to God.” (Merton)
- “The great sin, the source of all other sins, is idolatry.” (Thomas Merton)
- “...the refusal to become who we truly are.” (Matthew Fox)
- “Sin is always a refusal to grow. (St. Gregory of Nyssa)
- “To say ‘no’ to that participation [in the spiritual journey of growth and acknowledgement of our Divine Source] is the primary meaning of sin.” (Fr. Thomas Keating)
- “To stop the flow [of love] is the core and foundational meaning of sin, much more than the individual doing of "bad" things.” (Fr. Richard Rohr)

I recognize that there are levels and degrees of sin, ranging from torture, child abuse, mass murder, hate crimes, rape, to an unwillingness to forgive another or ourselves, being hurtful or critical or judgmental of others or ourselves, and everything in between and more.

Who is a sinner?

Using the definitions above, we all are sinners. Even Pope Francis declares he is a sinner. We will never be able to “hit the bull's eye” all the time. We are all guilty of injustice, lack of compassion, hurtful acts and thoughts, unskillful communication. Therefore, I can say honestly, “I sin, and I am a sinner.” The problem I have is that both the words “sin” and “sinner” have such an overlay of guilt that there is the implication that I am a terrible, vile person. I feel that when I say, “I am a sinner,” I am trapped and labeled forever, like a prisoner who is always seen as an ex-con; or a child sex offender who is always seen as a pedophile.

If I can say “I'm a sinner” in the same matter-of-fact way I would say I'm a sister, or I'm a Democrat, or I'm a woman, then it's just another aspect of my human identity. But, with the overlay of tremendous guilt, self-condemnation and self-recrimination, it is impossible for me to be neutral about this.

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Contemplating sayings from the Bible

Jesus died for our sins.

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The first statement is confusing because one way to interpret this is that if he had died for our sins, then we wouldn't be sinning anymore! But we do. He didn't take away our sins; we are not sin-free. We still act as if we are separate from each other and from Nature and from God.

I believe Jesus died to show us we are not separate from God. We are human *and* divine. He died to show us that if we live and believe as he does, we will find, and be in, the Kingdom of Heaven. He died to show us our Source and how to keep connected to our Source, to God, and what we are supposed to do to love God and love each other. He died to show us that if we look within, and “repent,” i.e. change the way we are looking for happiness, we will be in union with God. And he showed us the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

He died because he was a revolutionary showing us a new way to be and behave. He was killed for his vision, his efforts to convey and practice his vision. He passionately loved and loves humanity without restraint or condition. That he died for the love of humanity—for all of us—doesn't mean we should feel badly about that. We just need to follow his path, a path of love.

The Jesus Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

The origins of this prayer are the Egyptian Desert Fathers of the 5th century. The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) were an ascetic bunch, so this classical version suited their austere spiritual life. This prayer, as well as a simpler version—*Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me*—is still recommended for Christian practice today. It is commonly said repetitively in order to “pray without ceasing.” I have found the Jesus Prayer a powerful meditation in times of high stress.

Here's my problem: If I say the classical version of the prayer over and over, constantly reinforcing that I am a sinner (and not much else), I am always going to feel terrible about myself. How will I ever be free, happy, able to fulfill my potential or purpose in being here if I feel like an ugly, deadly oil spill?

Just suppose I carry “I am a sinner” into other realms of life. Let's say...

I don't report a small chunk of income to the IRS. Should I say,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a cheat?

I kill flies, ants and mice. Should I say,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a murderer?

I am not always totally honest. Should I say,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a liar?

I take the biggest cookie for myself. Should I say,

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a greed-head?

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I sometimes imagine a handsome stranger as a sexual partner. Should I say,
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, an adulteress?

Final Thoughts

We're all trying to be more compassionate, more generous, more truthful. But while we're in the process, do we always call ourselves liars and cheats and greed-heads? Should I go to some meeting and say, "I'm Gibi, a sinner"? Most parents know you address the kid's bad behavior; you don't say what a bad kid s/he is. You say, "Joey, that was a stupid thing to do." You don't say, "Joey, you are stupid." Or you say, "Suzie, you have sinned," not "Suzie, you are a sinner."

Here's a Bible story about sin. Priests bring an adulteress to Jesus for judgment. By law she's supposed to be stoned to death. He says that whoever has not sinned should cast the first stone. So since none of those fine folks feel they can call themselves sinless they all go away. And Jesus says to her, "Where have they gone? Has anyone condemned you?" She says no. And He says, "Neither do I. Go and sin no more." (i.e. "Go and don't do that again.")

If I sin, or "miss the mark," I can say to myself, "Whoa, I screwed up here; I can learn from this; I can ask for forgiveness from the person or whatever, and God, and try not to repeat that sin, and keep going, and believe, that I am still a beautiful person, made in God's image. I mean, there's no question about it, I sin. I am prideful, I can be punishing, critical, judgmental, impatient, intolerant, harmful; you name it. But it doesn't mean I am forever damned as a human being, which is the implication of calling ourselves—or being called—a sinner. Who laid this guilt on us? How have we come to accept and believe it? I would say the implication comes from the Powers That Be—namely the Church—who want to keep us disempowered, and want to keep their power. When I consider that the original Bible was written in Greek, then went to Latin and then to English, I see a lot of people were involved writing what they wanted to write, what they wanted people to hear.

When I'm a selfish person, a liar, a murderer, a cheat, an adulteress, then I can say I am these things. But to have this blanket identity as a sinner for those times when I have sinned is punishment. God and Jesus do not punish us. Nor, in my mind, does God want us to suffer where we don't need to suffer. Lord knows life brings us plenty of suffering as it is! To be fair, calling myself a sinner can be a useful reality-check; a dose of humility is good medicine. But to be thinking of myself as a sinner—inducing self-punishment and self-flagellation—is to cause a lot of unnecessary suffering.

So if you say the classical version of the Jesus Prayer you are going to feel like a worm (I mean worm in this case in a derogatory way because, in fact, worms are very beneficial) and you bet, sometimes we are worms, but sometimes we are angels.

In the end, at this moment, I have a way to understand and accept those troublesome terms, and say, without guilt and self-recrimination, "I sin," and "I am a sinner." I know that God, and Jesus, love angels *and* worms!