

The Self-Esteem Half-Century and the Problem of Sin and Grace

Psalm 14:1-6, 1 Timothy 1:12-17

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Yesterday was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Cantor Elliot came by the men's breakfast to ask for forgiveness for wrongs he had done us in the past year, and to extend his forgiveness for our wrongs to him. That's the focus in modern times, but in the Old Testament Yom Kippur involved sacrificing two goats for the sins of the people. The Temple was kind of a toxic waste dump for all the sins that had been brought there in the past year. The priest put all these sins on the two goats. Then the goats brought the people into the experience of forgiveness by acting out two truths about God's forgiveness. The first goat had his throat slit and his blood was spread around the temple—reminding the people that forgiveness involves someone else paying the price for what you have done. The second goat was chased out of the temple and driven for miles into the barren mountains, where he was driven off a cliff—reminding the people that forgiveness involves having our sins removed far away from us, as far as the east is from the west.

The point, you see, was not the bloodthirstiness of God or to say that we are like goats. The point was to say that God has found a way to deal with the problem of sin and forgive us. In fact, the problem of sin is behind most of the ritual in the Old Testament. The assumption, which no one needed to prove, was that all of God's people had done wrong and been unfaithful to him. Turning away from God—or ignoring God—is what the Bible calls sin, and it is the teaching of the whole Old Testament that sin has broken our relationship with God. He wanted us to be his people, but we chose to be our own people. Most of what you read in the Hebrew Scriptures, from Adam and Eve onward, starts from the *a priori* fact that there is a sin problem that needs to be dealt with.

We say every Sunday, and I hope more often than that, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those whose sin against us," but that may be one of the only times we actually utter the word "sin." It seems almost antiquated, and certainly impolite. One doesn't speak about such things these days. Even if there were such a thing as sin, hypothetically, who would have the right to determine what it was? That's the world we live in.

During a local controversy, I told one resident that I thought her personal attacks were inappropriate and downright sinful. Her response was "I can't believe that you *as a minister* would call it sinful!" It was as if I'd said something unspeakable; instead of using the N-word, I'd used the S-word. My response was something like "Huh? It's *because* I'm a minister that I'm looking at your political act through a moral lens and calling it sinful."

Of course, if you believe that a minister's primary job is to be nice, you can see where she was coming from. It's as if Mister Rogers said, "You've been a bad neighbor!" But a Christian or a Jew—and I suppose a Muslim—looks at the world through a different lens. We are called to face the truth that nice people can be just terrible and the person we ought to worry about offending is not Miss Manners but the almighty and perfect God. Sin is not a problem for people out there, but for us. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote in *The Gulag Archipelago* after suffering in prison at the hands of Russians we would call evil:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us

and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

Who even believes today that there is evil in the human heart? But this morning I am trying to think about those two texts we read—assigned by the common lectionary—that talk about how sinful we all are, even if we are great preachers like Paul.

I worry sometimes about the Millennials, the generation now in their 20's and into their early 30's, and whether they can understand the problem of sin. *The Wall Street Journal* has called them "Trophy Kids" because they grew up in a time when every child received a trophy, whether his team won or lost, whether she played well or not. In some schools, red marker pens were banned because the color was considered too harsh and judgmental. We wouldn't want to point out mistakes. This is the culture in which the most familiar words of Jesus are "Judge not."

Millennials are all special. When my daughter Sarah was a toddler, we began singing to her, "Special, Special, Sarah's very special. God made Sarah!" Of course it's true, but why did we Boomer parents think that self-esteem was the "one thing needful" in life? Gretchen Neels, a Boston consultant, tells of coaching a group of college students for job interviews. She asked how they believe interviewers view them. She gave them a clue: it begins with the letter *e*. "Excellent!" they shouted out. "Enthusiastic!" "Energetic!" Not even close. The correct answer was "Entitled." Online you can find serious academic papers on the rise of narcissism over the generations.

But I have a little surprise for you: that rise in narcissism is pretty much a straight line upward for the past fifty years. It goes back to when I was young. When I was in high school a book came out called *I'm OK, You're OK*, which pretty much summed up the philosophy. By the early 70's it reached the *New York Times* best seller list and stayed there for two years. The ideas in that book—that we are all OK—were taught to me in the youth group in a Southern Baptist church! By 1973 the notion that everybody is OK was so widespread that the psychiatrist Karl Menninger wrote a book called *What Ever Became of Sin?* He argued that it had almost disappeared from the culture and wasn't present even in pastoral counseling.

Today is the 50th anniversary of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. We remember violence against the Civil Rights movement, and we all condemn it. But we see it as something that *bad* people did, not as something that we are connected to, not as the result of racism that we participated in and a system we benefitted from. We Boomers grew up thinking that we were the righteous people in a nation of racists and warmongers. We were going to change the world because our hearts were so pure. And since our hearts were pure, we could do anything we wanted: alcohol, drugs, casual sex, casual divorce. None of that was sin, if there even was such a thing.

One of my most difficult friendships has been with a fellow Boomer who is an evangelical Christian but says that he can't remember doing anything wrong in his whole life. I've tried to tell him that Jesus only came for sinners. He can't help the righteous. At first I thought this guy was exceptionally delusional, but sometimes I wonder if he just says out loud what other people think: "A sinner? Me?"

Look at Psalm 14. "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt. They do abominable deeds." What we are talking about is not philosophical atheism but practical atheism, acting as if there were no God to whom you are accountable. The evil deeds flow from that choice to live as if God has no place in human life. But that first verse goes on: "There is no one who does good." Surely he is talking about the fools and the atheists. Surely he doesn't mean no one.

But then the psalm pictures God looking down from heaven on humankind. It's the kind of scene we see before Noah's flood and before the Tower of Babel is knocked down. Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, is looking down to see if there are any who are wise and seek God. But God is disappointed. "They have *all* gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one." It reminds us of God offering to spare Sodom if Abraham could find even one righteous man, but there was not even one. This is the verse that Paul quotes in the letter to the Romans: "There is no one righteous, not even one...All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Scholars say it's got to be a hyperbole. If no one is righteous, who is the speaker in the psalm? Why does God talk about "my people" or "the company of the righteous?" I admit there is a tension between the first half of the psalm and the second, but I think the first half is still true. Of course there are people that God has made righteous and who are faithful to him, but the human condition is that we are all perverse. Even those who are righteous at the moment have been perverse in the past, but have been forgiven. We don't have to make up a doctrine like original sin to say so. You only have to turn on the news—or look around you—to see that everybody you know is screwed up in one way or another; no one is without selfish motives; no one is as good as humans were created to be—which is to say no one is as good as Jesus.

You notice that the prime example the psalmist gives of evil is not sexual sin or murder. It's mistreating the poor. Evil-doers "eat up my people as they eat bread." And "my people" or "the righteous" are identified as "the poor." Those who have plenty to eat are in fact eating the poor, because they are not giving the poor their fair share. We who live in rich nations consume resources that could feed the poor in the Two Thirds World. We are, the psalmist says, eating the poor like bread. Micah is more graphic in his words to the rulers of Israel: "You skin my people alive and tear the flesh from their bones. You eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones. You chop them up like meat for the cooking pot" (3:3 NLT). That selfishness that is absolutely endemic in almost every human society is what God calls sin. There is none that is righteous—none who are actually as concerned for their neighbors as they are for themselves. We all fall short.

But, Paul reminds us in 1 Timothy, here is a word you can rely on, the heart of the gospel: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Then Paul adds, "and I was the worst of all." Before he encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul was a religious fanatic who had made himself a violent enemy of Jesus. He was out to arrest people who worshiped Jesus. He hated them and he blasphemed the name of Jesus. But look what happened to me, Paul says. God had mercy on me as the worst of sinners so that everyone could see the incredible patience of Jesus. If Jesus could forgive me, his worst enemy, he can forgive you.

I am so thankful, Paul says, that Jesus would call me to serve him. It was Paul's sense of being forgiven of such great sin that filled Paul with an awareness of God's amazing grace. His message was always filled with joy, because he had good news to announce: not just Romans 3:23, that all have sinned, but Romans 3:24, that all have been made right with God through the free gift of God's grace made real through what Jesus did on the cross. To Paul it was an unbelievably happy turn of events in human history, the absolutely unexpected end to the Jewish hope of being made right with God through sacrifice: the Messiah turned out to be not a great warrior-ruler, but God himself made human, and then the Messiah himself died for the people as a sacrifice, and *then* was raised to his eternal throne. On the individual level, this means that each

one of us can be made right with God—our sin problem solved—if we can just believe and live into the reality that God has *already* forgiven us and reconciled us to himself.

None of that joy makes sense if we don't recognize that humanity has a sin problem that has alienated us from God. And you will never share that joy unless you recognize that you have a sin problem of your own. We sing "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Some people don't like to call themselves a wretch. They'd rather be gentle on themselves. Say something that doesn't hurt their self-esteem. But here's the deal: if you don't understand that you are a wretch, the grace doesn't seem very amazing. If you don't see yourself as God's missing child, helpless, you won't experience the joy of being found. If it never dawns on you that you have been blind about who you really are and how much God loves you, you will never really see. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.