

“Sin Is Our Only Hope”

Hosea 2:14-23

I’m wondering if any of you have ever felt good about making a change? I ask that because there seems to be an outsized aversion to having made a change in our world. Politicians can never say, “I changed my mind about this or that because I came to a new perspective,” even “seeing where I had been wrong.” This kind of refusal to admit mistakes is duplicated in work places, in families, at schools, I’m sure even at church. Change is seen as a weakness and has become inadmissible, so that we find ourselves unable to change because we are and have always been doing things right and resist and avoid critique.

Perhaps we act this way because we feel that the consequences of admission are too ominous. Will I end up with some loss of esteem or worse as a consequence? Will I be looked at as less than? Zack Henderson posted last week that he saw why so many people have lauded the play *Hamilton*. Kate Rohrbaugh chimed in that it was very emotional. I got more candid and added that I couldn’t get through the song “It’s Quiet Uptown,” without getting emotional – in other words, “crying” – Hamilton and his estranged wife, Eliza, grieving the loss of their son Philip in a duel, with Eliza taking Alexander’s hand as the words “forgiveness” were sung. I admit it, the emotion overwhelms me. But in sharing this, I feel vulnerable to showing what gets to me.

Barbara Brown Taylor has a short, insightful little book called *Speaking of Sin* which I read over and again. It’s a very easy read, I admit, which makes it easy to pick up and add to my list of how many books I make a goal to read each year. But I also so enjoy having her reiterate a lesson about sin that is so insightful to me.

She admits, for instance, that sin sounds like an old fashioned word and one, in mainline churches like ours, we would just as soon avoid even though it has a prominent place in the religious dictionary. But because sin is associated with judgment and hell and punishment, we would just as soon stick to love and grace in churches that are cautious not to offend.

She tells the story to illustrate what frightens us about sin. It’s the story of a little boy carried into a swimming pool by his grandfather, who is holding him because he doesn’t want the boy to be at risk. But the child so wants to be in the water that he struggles and struggles to get free of his grandfather’s hold. Finally, the little boy bends down, reaching into the water and trying to splash water into his grandfather’s face. But as he brings his hand up, he accidentally ends up slapping his grandfather hard across his face. “I remember the slap and then the silence and then the roar,” she writes. “In a flash of anger, the boy’s grandfather shouted at him and shook him hard. The boy went limp and silent in his arms. He had never heard his grandfather’s voice like that, had never been hurt by him in any way. And looking on, I saw their primal relationship ruptured in that moment.... Things would never be the same again.” That’s not to say we don’t know how to heed the warnings about sin before it’s too late, just like all of those warnings we hear not to touch the stove until we do and are crying and blowing on the burnt flesh on our scarred fingertips. Can I show you that mark that still remains

not quite sixty years later on mine? So we avoid talk about sin because it threatens to leave us cut off from the God we wish to trust. It has the risk in it whose consequence threatens broken relationship that won't be restored.

Our reading from Hosea provides a testimony for how inadequate this view of sin is. Called to speak God's message to Israel, Hosea had been told by God to marry a woman who was known for her promiscuity, which she continued. Every day that the brokenness of their marriage played out dramatized God's feelings of abandonment and humiliation by Israel, the prophet announced. Their worship of other gods, their mistreatment of the poor, their false sense of having freedom to do whatever they wanted to do without thought of another or of consequences were like being married to an unfaithful spouse. And yet, as broken as was God's heart, in our reading, we see God's hope. God's vision of the recognition of Israel's sin is that there can be reconciliation. God will pursue in a renewed romance. Their love will be rekindled. The will renew not only their marriage but also their sense of family will be restored. "Just let me stay by your side. It would be enough. She takes his hand. It's quiet uptown. Forgiveness. Can you imagine? Forgiveness. Can you imagine?"

Sin is that which gets us to notice our alienation. It's where we have fallen short with God and with others, where we've acted with corrupt intent, even angrily rebelled loving destruction because we no longer trust God and cannot be true to others. And as such, recognizing it is where our seed of hope whispers a promise of the restoration of our relationships.

Bullied by the way sin gets used by some to gain power or where it cancels out spontaneity and our freedom to be responsible in relationships, we have secularized sin substituting for it legalities and therapies. Actually, in many cases these have been helpful. But they also lack an honesty of what we are seeking to name and how we can be made whole.

Having read Taylor's book over several times, I remember seeing it on a certain occasion. I knew someone in my ministry who had done a silly thing, but also something that was perceived quite differently by others. In the process a matter asking apology, a little correction and restoration ended up perceived as like a crime. We're not really very good with crime. Instead of restoration, we punish crime. We hide away those who have committed crimes, taking away their dignity, their humanity. Not having sin, one of the ways we deal with wrong is to criminalize wrongdoers, lazily discarding those we label as criminals like you would take a bad spark plug out of your car's engine.

The other prominent way we deal with wrong is by using a medical model. This method is much more humane, to be sure. To call substance abuse a disease has taken away the stigma of those who confess their inability to control their abuse and who turn to a higher power to help them. But maybe, the twelve-step model, and twelve-step programs are a grace-filled way of describing sin, repentance and restoration, the grace lying in the AA or NA group who seems to have recovered a capacity for faith, hope and love where the church in its propriety and privilege, had lost it. And yet, despite the healing mission of therapies whether genetic or psychological, can also sometimes forget and even dismiss our capacity for response-ability.

Taylor says "sin is our only hope!" And that is because our understanding that something is wrong is the first step towards that change that can still be a grace-filled promise. Hosea's testimony is that there is a God waiting for us to confess and hope

because our God longs, like a broken-hearted lover, to be in such relationship with us, promising that the fullness of that restored relationship also promises community with one another.