

Hearts Called to Goodness Struggle with the Question of Sin and Evil
Mark 7:1-7, 14-16, 20-23; James 1:17-27; and Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Pastor Caitlin Trussell with Augustana Lutheran Church on August 29, 2021

Our young adult son was about 11 years old when he leaned over and whispered, “Why does he always make us sound so bad?”¹ We were in Sunday worship. His question came during the hymn after the sermon. Quinn’s question led to a conversation on the car ride home about sin. A little heavy-duty maybe, but it was good for us to wrestle with the topic together as a family. He was in good company. Most people don’t really like the word. In fact, I often use milder terms like flaws or imperfections to talk about sin because many people have been beaten up by the language of sin and pretty much stop listening when the word is uttered. You can see the risk I’m taking as a preacher by opening with it.

Using the word sin is also a risk because the word isn’t used in the four Bible readings today. Not once. Check it out. I read through them with care. Let me know if you can find the word because I couldn’t. Words that ARE used in the readings include defile, evil, sordidness, and wickedness. This sermon is slipping even further into touchy territory. Touchy because many people have been hurt by accusations of being irredeemable. Touchy because, like my son Quinn, many people question conversations and sermons that make them feel bad.

It’s possible that the categories of good and bad are not that helpful when it comes to what we experience as true. For instance, in the Mark reading, there’s a long list of pitfalls that come from the heart. To hear this list more personally we can ask a series of questions. Regarding folly, who among us has not only participated in the ridiculous but also the ridiculously foolish? Regarding pride, who among us has not believed themselves to be better than someone else? Regarding slander, who among us has not gossiped our way through a phone call? Regarding envy, who among us has not looked at someone else’s belongings without wanting any of them? Regarding deceit, who among us has not spent time figuring out how to withhold the full truth? Regarding adultery, who among us has not let a friendship teeter into the romantic because we’ve stopped caring

¹ I ALWAYS get permission to share someone’s story in a sermon – especially if they’re named and extra-especially if they’re family. Quinn gave me permission and thinks the story is a good fit for the direction of the sermon.

who gets hurt? Regarding avarice and greed, who among us has not purchased more toilet paper than we need?

These questions are relational - meaning that these behaviors affect relationships between people. The questions that I listed help translate Jesus' list into the here and now. Granted, I've kept the questions fairly nonthreatening. We could dive deeper with the questions and shift into the brutally honest but that's neither wise nor kind since we're not talking back-and-forth in this moment. Although, I'm game for that conversation if anyone would like to have it. The point of asking those questions is to reveal a truth about being human. We have the capacity for evil within us. We see it play out in our own lives and in other people's lives near and far. Jesus' challenge to his disciples at the end of the Mark reading reveals the limits of our own efforts to avoid the naughty column and list ourselves among the nice.

Jesus' teaching also highlights the limits of religious tradition. He cautions us against creating doctrine out of traditions. It's also a good moment to normalize the Jewish traditions in the reading of washing hands before eating and washing the dishes afterwards – things many of us do every day. The Pharisees and Jesus were debating the relevance of religious tradition in light of God's commandments. It's important to remember that God gave the Ten Commandments to sustain life among God's people. They were life-giving. The Deuteronomy reading today emphasizes life in this part of the preamble to the Big Ten. Moses said, "...give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live..."

Jesus' list of sins in the Mark reading describe what happens when the commandments aren't followed, and we break our relational obligations to each other with sinful behavior. As Christians, we hear Paul's letters in the Bible separating the law from salvation to the point that we forget that the law's intention is *life-giving*. Christian scripture often reminds us that God's relationship with us does not depend on tallying up points in our favor by following the law. God's relationship with us depends on God's goodness first and not our own achievements of obedience.

Which brings us to the reading from James. This Sunday we start five weeks in which our second readings in worship come from the book of James. Lutheran Christians can struggle with James because we often think it leads with action, calling for obedient action as evidence of a living faith. Martin Luther even called it the “epistle of straw” for its lack of emphasis on grace. You have guessed correctly if you anticipated my suggestion to read the short book of James this week. It’s not clear who James was written for, but it seems to be written as encouragement for a group of Jesus followers who are at risk from a hostile ruling class.² And the encouragement towards obedience and action seems intended to connect thoughts about faith with living the faith. It’s much easier to listen quietly than to live out our faith. The book of James challenges us to be more than hearers of the word by becoming doers of the word. We know from experience that our hearts contain more than the sins listed in Mark. Humans are creatures capable of great compassion, courage, and care. James connects those positive actions of the heart with God when he writes that, “Every generous act of giving, with every gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”

When I pray, “We love you God, thank you for loving us first,” I’m reminded of God’s goodness as the ignition for my own actions – even the act of love. Quinn’s question about badness is only a piece of the story of the heart. Later in the 10th chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people to circumcise their hearts, meaning that their identity is secured first by God’s love and only then becomes visible by their obedient acts of love.³ Jesus similarly challenged his disciples, cracking open religious ritual to amplify the call on the heart to which we are also called. Our religious practices serve as an amplifier to our call as disciples. Then discipleship becomes a gift in our own and other peoples’ lives as we hear and do a life of faith. Faith that’s born from the God whose love makes goodness possible. Thanks be to God and amen.

² Matthew Skinner, Professor of New Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. Sermon Brainwave Podcast for Lectionary Texts for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost on August 29, 2021.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/799-14th-sunday-after-pentecost-ord-22b-aug-29-2021>

³ Deuteronomy 10:16 but really 10:12-19. God’s love of the widow, orphan, and stranger calls us to the same.