

“No One Who Abides in Him Sins....”

Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48

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When the week began, I was not sure what I would be preaching on today. I pondered the four passages appointed for the day. There’s the speech that Peter gave, after he healed the lame man outside the temple, in Acts 3. It’s a speech about how God brought healing to that man through faith in Jesus Christ – the very same Jesus Christ whom the Jews whom Peter was addressing had demanded be executed. There’s the Psalm, which is a prayer of someone who is placing their faith and trust in God, even when many people around him are following their own will rather than that of God. There’s the epistle reading, which is an exhortation from John to the Christian believers, calling on them to purify themselves and put away the works of unrighteousness. Finally, there is the story from the tail end of Luke’s gospel, when the risen Christ appears to his disciples, in bodily form, confirming the promises he had given to them before he died, and reminding them of their role as witnesses to the resurrection. All of these passages are God’s word to us; all of them are filled with wisdom and insight. The question for me was, where is the *sermon* in all this? What is the *message* God wanted me to share with you today?

By Friday evening, I was starting to feel a little desperate. *Come on, Jesus, give me a clue*, I prayed; *I’m running out of time!* I read the passages again, carefully, line by line ... and then something struck me; an insight, a revelation, something that was in plain sight but that I hadn’t yet seen. There is a common thread running through all four of these passages, a clear theme, a specific *word* that is mentioned in each of them. I don’t mean a common word, like “the” or “and.” No, there is a *biblical* word, a *theological* word, a word that we don’t often hear except in church. Indeed, in these four passages, that word appears *nine times*. How had I failed to see it? Sometimes, God’s truth is staring us right in the face, and we are just too blind or too distracted to see it. What’s the word? The word is *sin*.

So I wasn’t planning on talking about sin today. I didn’t choose this topic. The topic chose me!

Let’s take another look back at those four passages. Where does *sin* show up in these readings?

In the story from the book of Acts: Peter’s last line to the Jews he is speaking to is this: “Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your *sins* may be wiped out.” What sins? Peter had just named them. “God ... has glorified his servant Jesus, whom *you* handed over and rejected.... *You* rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you.... *You* killed the Author of Life.” These people were complicit in the unjust execution of Jesus Christ. That sin is on *their* heads.

In the Psalm: the Psalmist prays, “When you are disturbed, do not *sin*; ponder it upon your beds, and be silent.” The apostle Paul alludes to this verse, when he says “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.” (Ephesians 4:26) Sometimes there are things that happen – whether to ourselves or to others – that make us angry. But even if we are *justifiably* angry, we do not have

license to sin. We need to find *other* ways to deal with our feelings, and the events that led to them.

In the epistle of John: the word “sin” appears six times, in the space of three consecutive verses: “Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.” These verses remind the Christian believers – both then and now – that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to *put away sin*. John says, “all who have this hope in him *purify themselves*, just as he is pure.” Jesus Christ did not sin, and we are called to follow his example, making every last effort to remove all forms and manifestations of sin from our own lives. We need, simply put, to *purify* ourselves. “He was revealed to *take away sins*,” John tells us. “No one who abides in him sins.” If we persist in our sins, we demonstrate that we aren’t truly in Christ. That doesn’t mean we will *never* be truly in Christ; it certainly doesn’t mean that our sins are unforgivable; but it does mean that each time we sin, we abandon our fellowship with Jesus Christ. Every time we sin – to borrow words from Peter’s speech – we “reject the Holy and Righteous One;” we “kill the Author of Life.”

And in Luke’s gospel: Jesus tells his disciples that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed” in Christ’s name “to all nations.” Who is going to do the proclaiming? *They* are. What are they going to proclaim? Two things: first, *repentance* – the act of *turning away* from sin. Second, the *forgiveness* of sins – the reality that, through faith in Jesus Christ, the sins of our past are washed away. It is important to remember that repentance and forgiveness go hand in hand. *Forgiveness* is contingent on *repentance*. If you aren’t willing to repent of your sins, don’t expect to receive forgiveness. God asks us to turn *away* from our sins. That’s a critical, integral part of what it means to follow Jesus.

So that’s what these four passages have to say about sin. The theme was right there, in plain sight. Indeed, sin itself is *all around us*, and often we are just too blind or distracted to see it.

Earlier this week there was a gut-wrenching tragedy in nearby Delta Township: a father shot two of his children, then turned the gun on himself. All of them died. This one hit some for some of our members; some of you *knew* that man. One of you asked me a question, something like this: “What is going on in our country? I can understand someone killing themselves, but how could someone kill their own *children*?” My response was quick and immediate; I said something like: “there is a deep sickness in our country; there are massive numbers of people here in the United States who are not well, emotionally or psychologically or spiritually.” When I thought about it more, I remembered that the problems are not unique to our country, though we do seem to be going through an extremely difficult period right now, and we seem to have a particularly intense problem with gun violence compared to other developed nations. But the reality is that the cloud of sin hangs over *every* nation.

So then I got thinking about other things going on in the world, other stories that were reported in the news this week. I thought about mass shootings, protests in Chicago and Minneapolis, scandals, criminal trials, conspiracy theories, flat-out lies, even the sanctions against Russia. There is a common thread at the root of it all those stories: the ever-present reality of human sin. Of course, not *every* story in the news can be tied to sin – Prince Philip’s death, a volcano erupting on St. Vincent – but many, *many* of them can. Human sin is almost omnipresent. I’d like to encourage you, whenever you read or hear a news story in the coming week, ask yourself: “in what way is this story about human sin?” The truth of the matter is that a *lot* of what fills the airwaves stems from the ever-present reality of human sin.

And yet ... Jesus Christ came to *change* all of this. Jesus Christ came, says Acts, “so that your sins

may be wiped out.” Jesus Christ came, says John, so that his followers will “purify themselves.” Jesus Christ came, says Luke, so that “repentance and forgiveness of sins” would be proclaimed in his name “to all nations.” If the world were to follow Jesus Christ – and I mean, *really* follow Jesus Christ, not just give him lip service – *so much of the sin that we hear about day after day would just simply ... disappear.*

The fundamental problem in the human race is sin. The fundamental *answer* is Jesus Christ.

So what do we do? We are sick and tired of all the senseless killings in our country. We are sick and tired of all the injustice, all the racism, and all the scandals. We are sick and tired of all the *lies* that people utter, and the tremendous *damage* that they cause. *What are we – as Christians – called to do?*

Well, the scriptures suggest, there are two things that are *essential*. The first is that we need to take a good, long, hard look at our own *personal* lives. We need to hold up our lives against the mirror that is Jesus Christ. How does *our* life resemble *his*? What things are we saying or doing that he would *never* have condoned? In what ways do we “reject the Holy and Righteous One”? In what ways do we “kill the Author of Life”? How do we *betray* Jesus with our words and our deeds in our daily lives? Taking a really deep look at our own complicity in sin is the first step, and it is *essential*. Americans are incredibly good at pointing fingers and placing blame. But we are *Christians* before we are *Americans*, and because we are Christians, we are to take the log out of our own eye *first*. What are we doing that is wrong in the eyes of our Lord Jesus? “No one who abides in him sins,” says John. We simply *must* begin by identifying, confessing, and repenting our *own* sins. Otherwise, we are nothing but hypocrites.

And what is the second? What do we *do*, if we truly want things to *change*? Do we write letters or send emails or make phone calls to our legislators? Do we go to demonstrations and protests? Do we donate money to organizations devoted to this cause or that? Perhaps, yes. If we want the laws in this country to change, if we want policies and systems to change, if we want to deal with some of the systemic evil that is very real, then *yes*, as American citizens, we have the right to do such things, and at times we may feel compelled to act in such ways. I know that *I* have, at times, felt that burning urge.

But that is not the answer the New Testament gives. Of course, the people who wrote the New Testament did not have the kind of rights and freedoms that we have here in this country. To be sure, the New Testament does not *forbid* such acts. There is nothing un-Christian about communicating with our representatives in Congress, about speaking up for what we believe is true and decent and right, about giving money to organizations that care. But the New Testament *does* say that there is something uniquely *Christian* we need to do, in addition to, or perhaps even before, any of that. What is it?

Well, what did Jesus tell his followers? “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed” in his name “to all nations.... You are witnesses of these things.” What we Christians are called to do is *bear witness* to our Lord and Savior. *Tell* people about Jesus, about what he offers, about the kind of life he calls us to. That is to say ... *proclaim the gospel*. Do the work of *evangelism*. Spread the *Word*.

Here’s where so many Christians get stuck. Here is where so many get uncomfortable.

However: the fundamental problem in the world is human sin. We can change *laws* in our country. But we can’t change *hearts*. Only *God* can change hearts. If we really want to deal with the problem of sin, we need to help people connect with God, *abide in Jesus*. Imagine ... more and more people, across the world, *choosing*, voluntarily, to part ways with sin. *Imagine* the world that could be....

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