

Ephesians 4:25–5:2 (NRSV)

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

As God Has Forgiven You

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: August 9, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Ephesians 4:25-5:2

Sin has a bad name. It used to be said that to be called a sinner was to be called a bad name. But today we ridicule calling someone a sinner. The idea of sinning has a bad name.

I've taken to watching a BBC mystery series called Inspector George Gently. Gently is a police Chief Inspector in the North East of England where he and his sidekick, Detective Sergeant John Bacchus investigate crimes, mostly murders.

In one episode the pair ends up investigating the murder of a cocktail waitress at a hostess club in Newcastle. The club is something like the Playboy Bunny Clubs, except the women in this club are foxes. And the club is constantly picketed by a local religious group led by one Margaret Bishop. Margaret Bishop comes across as a prudish self-righteous obsessed do-gooder, whose simple-minded views on life are easily ridiculed. She hands out pamphlets. She warns of eternal punishment. She warns people not to go to the club. She's worried about sin. And almost everyone finds her over-the-top no-shades-of-gray approach to life ridiculous. She's worried about sin, and almost everyone finds her concern about sin laughable or even repulsive.

O yes, sin has a bad name. Today we are more attune to positive human potential. Look on the positive side. Live and let live. Sin seems such a negative, moralistic thing. If you internalize the idea, God forbid, it creates in you self-hatred and poor self-image. And it is true that most often today those who still talk about sin do it through clenched teeth, full of rancor and insufferable gloating. Many on the religious right speak with venom even as they claim to speak for God. O yes, sin has a bad name. At best its proponents are prudish. At worst they are hateful.

Sin has a bad name, which is a problem for poor old preachers like me. Sin is addressed hundreds of times in the New Testament including in our passage this morning. But we've become so uncomfortable with the terminology that uttering the word makes us wince. Nobody talks about sin in polite company unless they want to become a social pariah like Margaret Bishop. And surely church is polite society. So even in many churches today, especially those that see themselves as progressive, such as this one, talk of sin makes us uneasy.

Maybe some of you are already uneasy this morning. I sure have been using the word a lot. But don't tune out just yet. I promise not to take all the fun out of life, and I promise not to get all sanctimonious, either. But I would like to rehabilitate the idea of sin, at least a little bit.

This morning's passage from the letter to the Ephesians isn't a bad place to start. To avoid sinning Ephesians says we should be truthful. If we are angry we shouldn't do hurtful things as a result, and we should not hold a grudge. We shouldn't steal. We should give to the needy. We should not wrangle or treat others with malice. We should be kind and forgiving. Well, none of that sounds too bad, does it? We may not always be very good at those things, but to aspire to them seems reasonable enough.

By this measure, many people who go around talking freely about sin, who have helped give sin a bad name, actually do it sinfully. Ephesians says that being hurtful rather than building others up is sinful. Wrath, anger and malice are sinful, says Ephesians. It says bitterness,

wrangling and slander are sinful, too. So maybe part of the reason that sin has such a bad name is that many who go around acting self-righteously and calling others sinners have got it backwards. We don't like what they're doing. And guess what. We shouldn't like what they're doing, because they are sinning, and we don't like sin. So, you see, sin shouldn't have such a bad name after all. We actually don't like it when people sin either. So there you have it. Maybe we're done this morning, or maybe not.

Of course, it gets a little more complicated than that. Even if we eliminate the misuse of the term, which is a really big step for sure, even if eliminate people sinfully calling others sinners, it's hard to read the Bible and miss that it thinks we are in fact sinners. All of us. And that takes us back to the original problem. Most of us don't like to be called sinners. The Bible says we are. Our impulse is to jettison using the term altogether. And to be truthful, we may jettison the Bible, too. Oh sure, we wouldn't say that, but those who take it seriously we often call Bible thumpers, hardly a term of endearment and respect toward them or the Good Book.

But here's the trouble. In our heart of hearts most of us are imperfect, and we know it. Paul says elsewhere that we seem incapable of avoiding imperfection. We do things we wish we wouldn't. We don't do things we wish we would. We hurt each other. We hurt ourselves, Now, I don't mean always. Not at all. Most of us are decent, good people. But is there anyone here who has no regrets? Is there anyone here who has not been tarnished by their own thoughts and actions? Is there anyone here who has not wept over the hurt or sorrow they have caused?

But the good news of the Gospel is not to call us sinners and condemn us for it. It's not about God's hatred for us, as Fred Phelps wanted to think. The good news of the Gospel is that in the face of the disappointment we have in ourselves; despite how we have injured others, even those we love, despite the things we wish we hadn't done or the things we wish we had done and didn't, God in fact loves us. God so loved the world, John says. God so loved the world.

So, what does this mean? Does this mean that the Christian God, the God of the New Testament, has low standards? Don't worry; do anything you want; God loves you anyway? Or as Paul asks, should we then sin boldly because the more we sin the more opportunity we give God to love and forgive us?

Well, we could try that if we like. But the truth is, as we all know if we're honest, when we're dishonest, when we steal, when we're constantly angry, when we hurt others, when we're greedy, and when we think only of ourselves, doing these things makes us miserable. Oh sure, we can pretend it's different, but does anyone really think that Donald Trump is a happy man? Sinning makes us miserable, but when we are sinners, God still loves us, even if we don't love ourselves very much.

There's a saying that God loves us just the way we are, but that God also loves us too much to let us stay the way we are. God's love is meant to change us, to be transformative. Though most of us will not become perfect in this life, we can at least become clear that our sin does not fulfill us. This is a big step. For when we think that wealth and greed and self-righteousness and condemning others will make us happy, then we condemn ourselves to unhappiness. God's love is not a free pass to keep trying these things. God's love is to point us in the opposite direction, to convince us that these things do not work..

And here's where it all clicks into place. How does God's love do this? How does God change us? What exactly does God's love do? First, I suppose, it lets us accept that we are sinners without having to hate ourselves. If God loves us, who are we to hate ourselves? Second, God's love is an example for us. It is a model, an aspiration for how we are to be. Our passage today says near the end, "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as

Christ loved us.” In loving us God not only resists and overcomes our self-loathing, but also, and maybe even more important, God shows us the way to transformation. Quite simply, we are to love others, even though they are sinners as much as we are.

Fred Buechner has an image that I’ve told you before but is so spot on for what we are talking about, I cannot help but retell it. He’s talking about what sin, in this case anger and the desire for retribution actually accomplishes. Buechner says that anger and the desire for retribution make a delightful feast. We smack our lips as we harbor past grievances. We roll over with our tongues the memories of wrongs done to us deliciously, sweetly justifying our sense of injury and desire for revenge and justice. We ravenously imagine our enemies being paid back. It’s a sumptuous feast. The only problem, Buechner says, is at the end of the meal, when we look out over the banquet table, the skeleton, the carcass stripped to the bone, is ours. We ourselves were the main dish. We have eaten ourselves alive.

Better that we be “imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.” Better for us. Better for the world.

Margaret Bishop, the woman I mentioned the beginning who protested the sins of the hostess club was portrayed as an unlikeable and extreme character. She’s the kind of person who, we might say, gives sin a bad name with all her self-righteous gloating. But if we look a little closer, there is a twist in the plot. The likeable characters, the regular upstanding character, all of whom ridiculed Margaret, turned out to be sketchy in one way or another. Detective Sergeant Bacchus was a regular at the club it turned out, and was having an affair with one of the waitresses while he had a wife and young child at home. The owners of the club were wanted for crimes in America and ultimately were extradited. Joe Bishop, Margaret’s husband and an upstanding lawyer, turns out to be the murderer; he killed a waitress who had spurned his advances and tried to frame his wife for the crime.

Margaret, on the other hand, the prudish one, responds with grace. She continues to love her husband even though he has betrayed her and committed murder. She forgives him, even though she believes he will suffer the consequences of his sins. In the end, she comes off as one of the few clear-headed, honest and even likeable characters in the episode.

So, I suppose I end with a tale of caution. Sin has a bad name, often for good reason. Too many people clothe their sinning in holy garb and practice their hatred and anger in the name of God. On the other hand, it is altogether too easy to write the whole idea of sin off, as though the sins that normal upstanding people commit are really fine and of no consequence. Detective Sergeant John Bacchus, the philandering policeman, scoffed at Margaret Bishop’s prudishness, all the while minimizing the effects of his actions. Margaret Bishop, on the other hand, took sin seriously and nonetheless loved her sinning husband. Of the two, I’ll take Margaret Bishop.

In the end let us strive to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” Amen.