

JULY 12, 2020 WORSHIP SERVICE

INVOCATION PRAYER

God, we all share the human condition of being prone to wander. We all fall short of the kind of love you have for us and that we know in Jesus. By your Spirit prepare us to find a taste of spiritual freedom.

Amen

MORNING PRAYER – LOIS HARDER

O God, we come to you as people who need you – as people whose love is sometimes disoriented and not focused clearly on you. We acknowledge that when YOU are not the center of our lives and our attention, it's very easy to be distracted and to forget who we are and what's important.

We want to be your faithful people. We want and need to be RE oriented, to bring our focus always back to Jesus – the one whose life, death and resurrection gives us a clear vision of your intention for humanity, God. And so we've gathered to worship, to sing and pray, to hear the words of scripture and to be re-energized and re-focused on our calling from you.

Because you are our God and our faith lies firmly in your love, we bring you our prayers. We ask that you continue to be with Elaine Banman as she heals from her knee replacement. We thank you for successful surgery and trust that on-going healing will happen. We ask for your continued presence also with the residents and the staff of our retirement communities – Bethesda, Kidron-Bethel, Schowalter Villa, Presbyterian Manor, Asbury Park, Pine Village in Moundridge, Homestead in Marion... just to name a few where we have connections to Alexanderwohl. God, you know how tired people are. You know that folks are discouraged and depressed, feeling isolated, lonely and overworked. WE know that through your Holy Spirit all things are possible and that you want what's best for all your children. And so we continue to pray for their health and well-being, in their bodies and their souls. May we also be motivated to advocate for them, encourage them, keep in touch with them and let them know your love through us. Be with administrators, especially, as they continue to make difficult decisions in the interest of everyone's safety.

God, be with those who are planning an online Assembly meeting for the Western District Conference. This has never been done before, so we ask for creativity and grace as plans are made.

Thank you for the ways you've been present with the Alexanderwohl Task Force – the group who's been working and meeting nearly weekly to think through the many details for planning how it might look when we might meet together again in-person for worship. Continue to grant wisdom, strategic and creative thinking, ideas and possibilities as well as the right level of caution and care. We're especially grateful for the opportunities to worship both on-line as we are today as well as the beautiful outdoor, shady space where we can drive-in and be in lawn chairs. We are so fortunate to have even these options that many others don't have.

O God, as we move into this series on sins and virtues, send your Spirit of curiosity, of open-ness to learning, to receiving your guidance and direction for our lives as individuals and as a congregation. Send us your Spirit of Unity and a sense of belonging to you and to one another even in these times of separation and distancing.

SERMON – “TALKING ABOUT SIN” – CALEB YODER

We are beginning an eight-week series on the seven deadly sins and the corresponding virtues. What are the 7 deadly sins? You’ve probably heard of this list before.

Pride, envy, greed, lust, gluttony, sloth, and wrath. These are traditional names, and in our contemporary world we don't often talk about some of these. Over the next weeks, we'll fill out what these actually might look like in our lives today and we will discover that we very much struggle with these in our culture. For each of these, there is a corresponding virtue: humility, contentment, generosity, chastity, temperance, joy, and love.

Next week, we'll begin with the first pair: the sin of “pride” and the virtue of “humility.”

Why now?

This pandemic is a disorienting experience, especially now as we hear of increasing cases. We thought this was over and we'd be returning to normalcy, but not so. Often its disorienting experiences that lead us to seek transformation. It is likewise disorienting to uncover our own sin. None of us are perfect, or will become perfect in this life. Yet we want to use this difficult season to open ourselves to the possibility of spiritual growth.

Is this list in the Bible? Not as a list like this, but they do show up in biblical stories. In the letter to the Galatians, Paul lists out a number of similar vices before proceeding to talk about the fruit of the Spirit.

This list of seven seems to go back to Evagrius Ponticus. Evagrius was a monk who lived in Egypt in the 300s and became regarded as one of the “Dessert Fathers.” Evagrius came up with 8 “bad thoughts” that one needed to overcome. Some of them were combined while an additional category was added to result in the more well-known list of “seven deadly sins.”

The next question is why this talk of sin? Sin is an uncomfortable word. It's the 3 letter s-word. We tend to reserve sin for "special cases" of egregious, immoral actions that are utterly shameful. I can empathize with someone who has been so lambasted and judged by the church that the word "sin" feels too loaded, too much of a trigger, and some other kind of vocabulary for the darker side of the human condition is needed.

Yet I believe for most of us, "sin" is a word that we can and should reclaim.

Part of what we need to do is “de-stigmatize” sin. That's not to excuse it, or say that it isn't destructive. But it's part of the human condition that we all struggle with. When we stigmatize the idea of someone sinning, then we provoke shame. Or we avoid the subject altogether, because good Christians should be “kind.”

Sin was already stigmatized in Jesus' day. Pharisees and teachers of the law classified certain people as "sinners." Jesus never related to people in ways that shamed them – unless they were the self-righteous who were shaming others.

In the biblical languages, sin was also an every-day word for “missing a goal.” It was used in the context of archery – when you missed your target, you “sinned.” Scripture has a number of words that capture the human predicament in different ways, like “injustice,” “iniquity,” “transgression,” or a lack of “shalom.”

I thought of Romans 7, because it is a very vivid passage, even if it is confusing. Listen again to some of these lines:

(verse 15) “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... but in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”

Doesn't that sure sound like something you've experienced? We know how we ideally would like to act or speak, or what our ideal habits would be, but it doesn't happen! Even if not something you'd call evil, we've all felt ashamed or frustrated at ourselves for giving in to an impulse that we didn't want to follow. We have examples, both minor and serious.

You thought about getting up early, but you couldn't get yourself out of bed. You couldn't resist that extra snacking. You couldn't bring yourself to initiate that hard conversation. You let those wounding words slip out that now require a repair to the relationship. You gave in to the impulse buy. You got caught in a little (or big) addiction. Then there's the cycles of shame, or sometimes ingenious self-justification to avoid the shame.

Paul's situation was working out what it meant for non-Jewish people to be welcomed into God's story, not on the basis of a covenant through the Torah of Moses given at Mount Sinai, but on the basis of the new covenant through Jesus, brought into effect by the Holy Spirit.

Paul is trying to say that the Torah – the Law of Moses – served an essential and good purpose in salvation history. It revealed what it looks like to live in right relationship with God and others. Rather than sinning in ignorance, God's people could see where they fall short.

But Paul seems to know human psychology. Every parent experiences how telling your child “no” makes them want to do it all the more. The “no” rarely works unless there's a compelling alternative “yes.”

The story of Israel is that they prided themselves as God's people because they had the Torah, but were unable to live the commandment of love that sums up the Torah. Something else is needed. As in Ezekiel 36:26, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

We all go for a while living in a kind of denial of our own shadow-side. The story we tell about ourselves excuses our behavior or makes us into victims. I know I have done that. Sometimes it's an experience of disorientation or wilderness that finally opens our eyes to the game we are playing.

Once that happens, we feel trapped. But we can't open our inner selves to allow the Spirit to change us without the suffering of having our blinders removed and seeing that need for change. For some of us, this happens in marriage. Your spouse is in a unique position to tell you what is wrong with you.

I'll give an example from my own life with respect to the sin of pride, which will be the theme of next week. Most of the time, I've not considered myself to have any struggle with pride. After all, my childhood was filled with plenty of insecure feelings.

A combination of personality and early childhood events caused me to be very shy and withdrawn as a child. So I felt a lot of social anxiety, and didn't consider myself any good at sports. But I did well in school and received plenty of praise for my areas of giftedness.

So it wasn't hard to internalize messages of affirmation of my gifts and see myself as "superior," and at the same time internalize an extremely high bar to always live up to. I could latch onto the things I was good at as a defense against my pain.

If pride can be understood as a feeling of superiority, entitlement, or expectation of affirmation and credit, then I can accept that I've fallen into that sort of pride.

Historically, this confusing passage in Romans 7 has been read two different ways:

One: Paul is reminding us that we can't save ourselves by our own effort, but by grace. So, he wrote about the struggle with sin to remind us that we will still struggle with sin even though we are saved by grace. Yeah, you are an ugly sinner. Don't worry, God will forgive you.

Two: Paul is describing life before becoming a Christian. Once you become a Christian, you have the Spirit, and your victorious life should look like Romans 8. Christians should be (nearly) perfect.

Just a side note, the "I" of Romans 7 is probably a rhetorical device, rather than Paul directly describing his personal experience – though I'm sure he had those days like anybody.

Rather than picking either the first option or the second option, I like to think of this as two different stories that we can live. We can live the story of Romans 7, which is being caught in a cycle of wanting to live differently but feeling powerless, versus Romans 8, which is life in the Spirit.

The Christian life actually includes both of these stories at the same time. We receive a taste of transformation and healing, but it isn't complete. I like to say that God's kingdom that Jesus announced was near is both "already, and not yet." The same is true of our lives: there's an "already" and a "not yet."

Our choice is not "which story will I exclusively live in?" but rather "which story will I make the defining story for my life?" "Which story will I lean into with faith?"

I wanted to make sure to include Romans 8:1-2 in the scripture reading: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." There have been times that my heart has condemned me and I've needed this verse or to hear the Spirit say, "I don't condemn you."

The beginning of the process is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:11 says, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

It matters what metaphors we use for sin. Many Christians think of a courtroom, and they envision God pronouncing “not guilty” as a result of Jesus’ death, even though you really are guilty. But a better metaphor might be to think of sin as a virus. Jesus said it’s the sick that need a physician. It’s not enough to be given discharge papers. We really want to get better – or at least be in a process of treatment and recovery.

If sin is like a virus, then we have to get it from somewhere. As we’ve talked about the topic of racism recently, I want to make one more point. People have noticed that in the letters of Paul, he doesn’t typically talk about sins in the plural, but rather about Sin with a capital S as a kind of power. This power lives within us, but it also is outside ourselves, creating havoc in our world.

It’s not hard to apply the words of Romans 7 to our individual lives. We caught the virus, so now we have to deal with its symptoms. But what about the pandemic? What about the brokenness in our world that seems to be beyond the sum of everyone’s individual choices?

We need a concept of systemic sin or systemic injustice in order to diagnose what’s going on in the world. Many Christians tend to believe if you just get every individual to shape up, then the problem is solved. Yet we know otherwise good people get caught up in our collective evil. Our silence or our inaction perpetuates injustice. That’s obvious enough when European Christians during World War II looked the other way while train loads of Jews and targeted people were shipped off to death camps.

“Systemic” means that this virus has infected the complex systems we need to live. It includes things like racial injustice and white supremacy, culture of violence, environmental exploitation, our profit-maximizing economic system.

This isn’t foreign to the Bible. In fact, recognizing systemic evils gives new meaning to biblical language such as the “powers and principalities.”

"Good" people can participate in systemic sin. We just can’t make simple choices to remove ourselves from it. We instead need to open our eyes to become aware and find practices that lead us toward liberation for everyone. We need to make choices that combined with movement from many places allows the system to change.

On the one hand, we need a way forward that is deeper than having rules to tell us what behaviors to avoid. At the same time, the way forward will also require deep personal and inner work – more than social action to change a broken system.

In a devotional, Richard Rohr writes: “Change happens, but transformation is always a process of letting go, living in the confusing, shadowy space for a while. Eventually, we are spit up on a new and unexpected shore... In moments of insecurity and crisis, *shoulds* and *oughts* don’t really help. They just increase the shame, guilt, pressure, and likelihood of backsliding into unhealthy patterns. It’s the deep yeses that carry us through to the other side. It’s that deeper something we are strongly for—such as equality and dignity for all—that allows us to wait it out.”

As we go through these seven sins and seven virtues, we are making use of a resource found in the Leader magazine from a year ago. This resource views each of the “deadly sins” as disoriented love, that needs to be rightly re-oriented. The services will be in two parts. One will take us through the sin – understanding it in our contemporary context. Then we will try out a spiritual practice together, and third, reorient ourselves to what another way looks like. We want to give examples in our worship services of spiritual practices that allow us to show up and "let God" so that the Spirit of Christ can do the work of changing us, of reorienting our love.

If our faith doesn't lead to personal transformation including journeying toward liberation from the systemic sin that we are enmeshed in, then what is our faith for? Freedom, transformation and healing are possible. It is also true that our growth and transformation will not be complete in this life. We are pilgrims on a journey.

BENEDICTION

May you overcome through the God who loves us. Know that nothing, neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, either the present or the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth or anything else in all creation can separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.