

A few weeks ago, we went into the theological weeds talking about transubstantiation and where we land with that, or rather, where I land with it and maybe where some of y'all do too. Like all theologies in The Episcopal Church, there's room for some wiggle across the theological spectrum there. But that sermon was such a surprise hit that I thought we could spend some more time talking theology this morning. I figure, if we can talk about transubstantiation and still be friends, why not? So today, we're going into another theological place. Today we're gonna talk about sin. Dianne, now would be an appropriate time for a "dun dun dun!" In all seriousness, I feel like I should give a trigger warning right here at the beginning, not something I usually do, 'cause we may end up going through a darker place than normal this morning.

So, sin. There's this idea floating around that Episcopalians don't like talking about sin. It makes us squeamish and when preachers start going on about sin, we start to worry that they're gonna say something about us or wrap things up with an altar call or, and I say this as a preacher, worse yet, say something unintentionally that feels like a judgment on me. There's an old saying that says, in church, a priest's words can never be a whisper. Put another way, the words of a priest carry an extra weight, so folks like me have to be extra careful when we make statements of preference or opinion or, hopefully rarely, judgment. I'd extend that to any churchy person, lay or clergy, when there's someone unfamiliar with the church around. I say all that not because I'm stalling but because I think it's important to be honest about this dynamic for a second, to sort of break the liturgical fourth wall. I know that when I step into this precise place, my words carry more weight than normal. I pray there are times when that works out for the best, and I pray there are fewer times where it doesn't. I try not to put stumbling blocks before y'all. Sometimes I inadvertently do, but on balance, I think we're doing ok. But I want to acknowledge that reality, that there is an uneven dynamic going on here. I want to be clear with y'all and remind you that, while I'm pretty fond of the things I have to say, we are a broad, big-tent kind of church. And theologically, that means we are more likely to have a spectrum of belief around any given topic than we are to have a single point of definition.

But we do have some solid starting points. The Book of Common Prayer provides one such starting point, naming sin as "the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people, and with all creation." Great, that's pretty clear, right? I mean, the words are clear. In practice, it gets tricky. Right from the get-go, how are we supposed to go about figuring out the will of God? It's far too easy for me to do the thing I want to do and then back-project some half-baked theology to justify my actions. I'd never do that, of course, and neither would any of you. But we *could*. What's the will of God, then? Again, the BCP says that we are created in God's image, which means we are to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God. That's actually kinda helpful. I'm feeling a callback to last week's sermon, to the commandments Jesus gives us: Love God, love your neighbor, love your enemy, love one another. If you can check all those boxes, you're probably getting pretty close to God's will. But sin is the seeking of our own will instead of God's. It's failing to tick those boxes. Maybe it's gentler to say it's falling short of ticking those boxes?

Ok, ok, ok. Another fourth wall break for a second. How many of you already hate this? I kinda do. Truth be told, I can read that Book of Common Prayer definition 'til the cows come home and leave again, but I can't shake the idea of sin that I grew up with. And there's nothing gentle about that kinda sin. In that sense, sin is the thing that means I'm going to hell. It's the thing that means I'm a bad kid even when I'm doing everything right. It's the thing that says a relative I'll not name to keep 'em from being outed, it's the thing that says they aren't allowed to love who they love. Sin is a convenient fall back when something rubs someone else

the wrong way. “I don’t understand it, I don’t get it, I don’t like it, it must be sin.” For some of you, that may not be your baggage, but it is mine. I’ll own that. Sin is a word that makes me shudder just hearing it, and I gotta admit to feeling a little awkward trying to paint sin as something other than that for y’all. It’s not that I don’t think it’s important, it’s just that I worry I’m piling the same crap on all y’all that I hated getting piled up on me.

In his book *Unapologetic*, Francis Spufford recognizes this whole bag of junk tied up with sin, so instead of trying to convince his readers that they just need to trust him on what he means by the word, he comes up with an acronym - THPTFTU. It doesn’t just roll off the tongue, I’ll admit that. THPTFTU - Stands for “the human propensity to mess things up.” (If you’re paying attention, that acronym doesn’t check out. I had to edit for the sake of the pearl clutchers among us. Replace the word “mess” with one that has the same number of letters and starts with “f.”) I don’t know about y’all, but that actually helps me a ton. The human propensity to mess things up makes the whole idea of sin easier to swallow, as much a part of the world as chaos or entropy. It’s just a thing that is, a natural part of how we exist. And yes, we have some ownership, but it’s not singling anyone out. Of course, we each do things that take that human propensity a little further, put a finer point on the messing things up in a way that we do need to take responsibility for the fallout. But even then, somehow this THPTFTU idea makes sin a whole lot easier to talk about. I hope it’s easier to listen to! So THPTFTU - the human propensity to mess things up - exists. What then?

This is where it gets fun. Good ol’ James says we should help anyone among us who wanders. Recognize that THPTFTU exists and then lend your enemy, your neighbor, one another a hand. This isn’t about judging. It’s not about fixing someone that’s a little odd. It’s not about praying the gay away or whatever new device some church has come up with to demand conformity. It’s about helping someone who has stumbled. With the full knowledge that I stumble all the time, too. At times, we do need to own up to where we’ve stumbled, make right what we made wrong. The Rite of Reconciliation (or Confession for you former Catholics out there) is the first half of that. Name the thing to God, be reassured of God’s forgiveness, and then go and make it right. Amen. We’re all done, right? No more talk about sin until the next time Brooks gets a bad idea for a sermon.

Well, almost.

See, the church has a long and difficult relationship with how it’s approached sin, and I’m looking at Jesus in the Gospel of Mark here. For a very, very long time, definitely back as far as Augustine, probably as far back as Paul, maybe even further back still, for a very long time, the church has been using the concept of sin as a means of control. Standing up for someone else that’s preaching on Jesus’ coattails, Jesus says if you “put a stumbling block before one who believes in me, it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea.” And then he goes on in a way that’s extraordinarily difficult for some of us to hear today. “If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and go to hell.” For far too long, the church has been coming at this backwards, and I’m sad to say, many still do. *We* never would, of course, right? But churches have been seeing themselves as the prophets preaching on the coattails of Moses and Jesus, and we’ve been pointing at those other prophets popping up and condemning them, saying they’re the ones setting up stumbling blocks, running them down and burying them under the weight of sin. We’ve cut off their hands to “save” them from sin, reminded them just how maimed they are, and then condemned them to hell anyway. Or, just as bad, we’ve called their very person a stumbling block so many times that they begin to believe it’s true and take Jesus at his word and with shame or fear or anger do the cutting on their own. And y’all, making someone feel like that, that’s sin. It’s not the shame or

whatever they bear, but the forces that made that person feel so broken that this was the only way to address the pain. That's the sin. The THPTFTU there, that sin, it's in the churches and their leaders and their people putting such massive stumbling blocks in front of God's people that they can't, they just can't. Everything breaks when one's already tenuous connection to God gets shattered by the forces of God's church going astray, and in this way, it absolutely has and often still does. The sinner ain't the person doing the loving, it's the one saying that love is sin.

When we talk about sin, I want to be abundantly clear. The human propensity to mess things up is a real thing in our world. It is both something that just is, and also something we occasionally participate in actively. It's what happens when we distort our relationship with God, other people, or creation. It's what happens when we fail to set up a space where all of God's people can come to be fully and freely themselves. What sin is not is anything that checks all the boxes of Jesus' commandments: Love God, love your enemy, love your neighbor, and love one another.

Earlier on, I asked the question how do we discern God's will and suggested that if what you're doing ticks all these boxes, we're on the right track. I want to stand by that. And I want us as a church to keep these commandments in mind. As we meet later this morning to consider the life of our church, let's keep coming back to this. Are we really living into God's will, are we really loving God, loving enemy, loving neighbor, and loving one another? Are we putting stumbling blocks at bay, and are we making room for prophets to pop up among God's people, especially ones whose voices we've traditionally hushed? Are we making room for people to bring their pain, their fear, their anger, their distrust, or their doubt here? I *think* we have. I *think* we do. I pray there will be no question. What are we about at St. Thomas? Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your enemy. Love one another.