

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 25 (C) ~ 26 October 2025
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-22
Psalm 84:1-6
Luke 18:9-14

Sin is Not a Four-letter Word

I have been at St. Dunstan's long enough now that I believe I have a fairly good sense of this place. I'm in my seventh year as your Rector – although, since I was here during COVID, I admit that it feels much longer than that – and I have learned a lot about this parish and this community. In fact, just this week I was at a diocesan gathering and was asked, as I often am, about where I serve. And you should hear how I talk about you!

Here are some of the things I always say:

St. Dunstan's is small, but mighty. There is a lot going on here!
It is a warm, welcoming congregation. There is joy in this place.
People genuinely seem to enjoy spending time with each other!
We are growing.

And, as I have been reminded recently as we have wrapped up our capital campaign...

St. Dunstan's people are incredibly generous.

Thank you for being who you are!

And...

I have learned something else over my time here thus far, which I don't necessarily share with my colleagues:

This congregation tends not to want to talk about sin. While, like every generalization, it's not universally the case, in general folks here are less likely to share when they have "erred

and strayed from [God's] ways like lost sheep,"¹ to quote our Prayer Book. Almost every week we stand together and

confess that we have sinned against [God], in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.

We go on to say that

*we have not loved [God] with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, and we are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*²

If you've been around the Episcopal Church for a while you may be able to recite those words from memory – which is both good and bad, isn't it? It's good, in that it means that the Church's theology has seeped into your bones: Whether you [we] realize it or not, you [we] are shaped by this language.

At the same time, though, being able to rattle off the words too easily means that we don't *always* stop to attend carefully to what we're saying. I'm reminded of my dear Dad, who must have been to be a top contender for the prize of the speediest grace over meals:

Bless us, O Lord, and these Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

I think I was well into high school before I actually figured out what he was saying! (Sorry, Daddy...but you know it's true.)

The point, of course, is that sometimes knowing the words by heart can be an impediment to *hearing* them.

So, while we say the words of Confession week after week after week, there seems to be less enthusiasm for looking individually at the ways in which we

*have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts.*³

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 41.

² *BCP*, 360.

³ *BCP*, 41.

How do I know this? Well, it's anecdotal, really: Every year, during both Advent, in the run-up to Christmas, and Lent, in the run-up to Easter, I encourage folks to consider making a private sacramental confession, either with me or another priest, as spiritual preparation. I explain how powerful it is, how truly liberating, to hear

*The Lord has put away all your sins.*⁴

Not just generally, in a "To whom it may concern" sort of way, but individually. Personally. *Your* sins, and mine. And corporately – systemically. *Our* collective sins.

And...Cricket. I have yet to have anyone in this parish take me up on it .

Let's also just say that Ash Wednesday, the day on which we focus on

*self-examination and repentance...prayer, fasting, and self-denial,*⁵

doesn't exactly pack the house. (I'll say more about that in a bit.)

Please don't hear any of this as a criticism. It's just true. It doesn't make me love you any less!

It also just means that, like so many Episcopalians, and like so many in this area, folks here at St. Dunstan's don't so much enjoy looking at sin.

It's cultural. I really do understand that.

But here's the thing, which some of you may remember me saying from this pulpit before:

Sin is not a four-letter word!

(Think about that for a second...)

Sin is *not* a four-letter word – in any sense.

Yet who among us wants to admit – to ourselves or to anyone else – that we have gone astray, or that we have caused harm – to one another, to ourselves, or to God?

⁴ BCP, 448.

⁵ BCP, 265.

It doesn't feel good to think of oneself as a sinner.

Welcome to the club, my friends! We are all in very good company.

Let's get next to that.

But what, exactly, *is* sin, anyway?

The Episcopal Church defines it in this way, 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.*⁶

I'll say that again: Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God.

How many times a day do we do *that*??

Another definition you may have heard for sin comes from the world of archery:

missing the mark.

The theologian N.T. Wright unpacks this definition as:

*failing to hit the target of complete, genuine, glorious humanness.*⁷

We *really* don't like to think of ourselves as human, do we? As though it were some deep insult – like when I try to explain to my Husky that he is, in fact, a dog.

It doesn't go over so well.

But the story is as old as human myth and history itself:

In the earliest verses of Genesis, First Man and First Woman want desperately to have what they cannot.

A few chapters later, the people of Babel try to build a tower “with its top in the heavens,” so that they might “make a name for [them]selves” (Genesis 11:4).

⁶ BCP, 848.

⁷ <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/04/04/believing-and-belonging/>

You probably remember the story of Icarus, in Greek mythology, who fashioned wings for himself out of wax and flew too close to the sun. We know how that turned out...

And we know how easy it can be for rulers to arrogate power and authority to themselves, as though they somehow were above the laws of God and humans – from Emperors and Pharaohs, right down to the present day.

We tend to resist – or at least bristle at – the limitations of our own humanity.

It's just true.

That's why Jesus, Who has a fairly good sense of the people of His day, is able to poke fun at them with such devastating precision and accuracy in today's Gospel. In the "Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector," Jesus lampoons "some who [trust] in themselves that they [are] righteous and [regard] others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). Remember that, like the stories of Adam and Eve and Babel and Icarus, this parable isn't meant to be about real people: It is hyperbole, exaggeration, a story told to make a point.

And we get it, don't we? Unlike some of Jesus' stories, this one doesn't require too much parsing out. We see the over-the-top ridiculousness of the Pharisee, boasting of his piety and humble-bragging that he is not like the wretched, *sinful* tax collector standing at a distance.

The Pharisee is such a buffoon, right?

Jesus really has his number, right?

Thank goodness that you and I are nothing like him, right?

We come to worship, we are warm and welcoming, we are generous...right?

Right?

Oh, dear.

You see what just happened.

This is Jesus at His most brilliant.

Because, as soon as we locate ourselves on one side of the Temple or the other, we become exactly like the very person being lampooned in the parable.

The division, the binary, collapses in on itself.

The dichotomy is proven false.

It's an inescapable Catch-22.

Jesus is clear: Whenever we thank God that we are "not like other people," we demonstrate that we are, in fact, like other people. Exactly the same.

Can't you just hear Jesus yelling "GOTCHA!?" I can picture Him doubled-over, holding His sides in amusement, tears of laughter streaming down His face.

It's important to have a sense of humor about these things... We must be able to poke fun at ourselves.

I mentioned earlier that Ash Wednesday services at St. Dunstan's aren't exactly packed, but I didn't explore *why*. Here are some thoughts, based on what I've heard from you all through the years:

"The services are inconvenient, because they're in the middle of the week."
(Well, yes, Wednesday tends to be...)

"Ash Wednesday is too somber; there's no joy in it."
(I actually disagree with this – more in a minute.)

And my favorite:

"I don't want to be one of 'those people' who show off by wearing ashes on their foreheads."

Oh, dear.

You see what just happened.

The point of Ash Wednesday is that we are all mortal, and fallible, and as hypocritical as the next person.

Welcome to the club, my friends!

We *are* all, in fact, exactly the same. We are all made of dust, and to dust we will return.

And remember what God can do with dust!

I am going to end by asking you to open the red *Book of Common Prayer* in your pew to page 499.

When there is a funeral in the Episcopal Church and the body or urn of ashes is present, the service concludes with the Commendation, essentially asking God to care for the beloved departed person in the next life.

I call your attention to the last paragraph on page 499, and I invite you to follow along silently as I read it aloud. I am going to alter the language just a bit:

*Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend ourselves, your servants. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, sheep of your own fold, lambs of your own flock, sinners of your own **redeeming**. In the fullness of your time, receive us into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light.*

If that isn't cause for joy, I don't know what is.

Sin is *not* a four-letter word, my friends.

Let's get next to that.

Amen.