

A Sin Problem?
September 13, 2015
Mark 2:16-17 (NRSV)

This morning's sermon concludes our series on *Speaking Christian*. We have explored baptism, communion, covenant, salvation, Bible and creed. As tempting as it may be to stop there our shared vocabulary would be incomplete without sin.

This morning's reading from the second chapter of Mark offers a glimpse into what Jesus thought of sin, and his rationale for spending time with those who sin.

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

When Jesus heard this, he said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these words from Mark's Gospel, and let us pray. God of sinners and of saints, help us to see ourselves as both, remind us that you meet us wherever we may be on the journey of life, and encourage us to stay connected to you. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

A few years ago Stephen Prothero, a bestselling author and professor of religion at Boston University, wrote a fascinating book titled *God is Not One*. In this text he explores the eight world religions he thinks are currently the most important. For each religion he presents the problem that religion is trying to solve, the solution to that problem, and techniques that can be used to move toward the solution.¹

Professor Prothero proposes that Christianity addresses the problem of sin with the solution of salvation by the means of faith alone or a combination of faith and good works.²

¹ Greg Smith. "Review of God is Not One." <<http://sowhatfaith.com/2010/06/14/review-of-god-is-not-one/>>

² Stephen Prothero. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World – and Why Their Differences Matter*. (HarperOne, 2010), p.12.

A few weeks ago I talked about the solution (salvation). Today, I want to address the problem (sin).

We have a sin problem. Of all of the world's many religions, only Christianity is primarily concerned with sin.

For many people, the only Christianity they have ever known is a strict religion. It requires adherents to live up to God's high standards. It asks followers to avoid sin. It even offers a list of 10 Commandments that tell people exactly what not to do.

"Thou shalt not" is the language many of us learned growing up. I don't think I need to list all ten for you, but hearing a few should help drive home the power of the "thou shalt not" language.

- Thou shalt not have other gods before God
- Thou shalt not take God's name in vain
- Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's stuff
- Thou shalt not murder
- Thou shalt not steal

Got it?

If you need me to talk in more contemporary language, I will. The 10 Commandments are they things you must not do. Put simply:

- do not
- avoid at all costs
- stay away from – ideally far away from!

In recent years many experts have talked about Christianity having an image problem. The core of this problem is a negative identity. In the popular culture Christians are known for what we are against rather than what we are for.³

Maybe this problem is built on the solid foundation of the 10 Commandments. Our behavioral ideals are presented as negatives so in copying them we pay forward a type of negativity.

³ For example: David Kinnamon and Gabe Lyons. *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why it Matters* (Baker Books, 2008).

A few winters ago, I was excited that the independent Christian scholar and public theologian Diana Butler Bass accepted my invitation to give a series of lectures in Naples. My excitement faded considerably when she proposed spending two of her lectures talking about the 10 Commandments.

In the end, I was thankful I did not try to talk her out of this plan. Her talk was the exact opposite of the expected “thou shalt nots” and incredibly practical. Diana Butler Bass reframed the 10 Commandments in exactly the way I think Christianity needs to be reframed by shifting from the negative to the positive.

During the lectures she restated each of the Commandment as a positive – that is, she told us what God wants us to do and the kind of person God invites us to become.

For example, “thou shalt not steal” becomes “you should build up, honor, recognize, and give credit to others for their gifts and achievements.”⁴

Maybe that should be your assignment for the week ahead . . . take a few minutes to write your own positive take on what the 10 Commandments call you to do and the sort of person this means you are intended to become.

- be creative
- think big
- and once you constructed your list be sure to share it with someone else.

While you are thinking about how you will approach this task, let me put it in perspective. Marcus Borg, the progressive Christian scholar and Jesus expert who wrote the book that inspired this sermon series, writes:

Sin matters. But when it and the need for forgiveness become the dominant issue in our life with God, it reduces and impoverishes the wisdom and passion of the Bible and the Christian tradition.⁵

⁴ Greg Smith. “Learning from Diana Butler Bass.”

<<http://sowhatfaith.com/2014/02/17/learning-from-diana-butler-bass/>>

⁵ Marcus Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (HaperOne, 2011), p.152.

Maybe it is time to rethink our sin problem.

The liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez claims,
"sin is denial of love."⁶

Jesus summed up the 10 Commandments in four words:
love God, love others.

Maybe we don't have a sin problem in the way we have been
conditioned to think we do.

Maybe we have a love problem.

Amen.

⁶ Progressive Christianity. "What About Sin?" < <http://progressivechristianity.org/resources/what-about-sin/> >