

Advent Lutheran Church  
Struggling with S Words  
October 20, 2024  
Romans 6:1-14  
Mark 2:13-17

Let me begin with a big philosophical question: What problem does religion solve? Notice I said religion, not Christianity.

While you continue to chew on that, I wonder about your answer to this follow up question: do all religions seek to solve the same problem?

Searching for answers to these questions I turned to the best-selling author Dr. Stephen Prothero who served for many years as professor of religion at Boston University.

In his book, *God is Not One*, he presents a simple approach to understanding religions that identifies each religion's problem, solution, and the techniques used to move from the problem toward the solution. His model shows us that each religion is focused on a different problem. For example,

- Confucianism: the problem is chaos / the solution is social order
- Buddhism: the problem is suffering / the solution is awakening
- Islam: the problem is pride / the solution is submission
- Judaism: the problem is exile / the solution is return to God
- Christianity: the problem is sin / the solution is salvation<sup>1</sup>

Siblings in Christ, it appears we have a sin problem. Whether or not you agree that the problem Christianity seeks to solve is sin, surely you recognize the central role the ideas of sin and salvation have played for more than 2,000 years. And, I imagine you've heard about faith and good works, which are the techniques Prothero believes Christians have used to move from their problem toward their solution.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Prothero. *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World – And Why Their Differences Matter* (HarperOne, 2010).

And, so, today, as we find our way toward a more spacious Christianity, I invite you to reconsider and perhaps even to struggle a bit with the S words of sin and salvation.

Does anyone here besides me struggle a bit with the word sin or perhaps the word salvation or possibly with both of them? If it feels like these and other religious words you grew up with no longer sound the same or carry the same meaning, you may be on to something. In fact, one of the people who has most shaped my own theology, Dr. Marcus Borg, wrote an entire book to address this. His book, *Speaking Christian*, explores a whole host of Christian speak or churchy language – words and terms like heaven, mercy, righteousness, born again, sin, and salvation.

Borg starts off by naming that a specific version of Christianity has had such a strong influence on Christian words that some people think it is impossible to salvage them. He, however, believes that we cannot discard these old terms, but instead must do the hard work of restoring them in ways that honor their original meaning.

Rather than viewing sin from what he calls a “heaven and hell framework,” Dr. Borg invites us to look at sin more comprehensively. But, first, a few words about this thing he calls a “heaven and hell framework.” He uses it to describe a rather prevalent perspective that is heavily focused on Jesus dying “for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven, if we believe in him.”<sup>2</sup> It offers a narrow way of understanding Christianity places an unusual and unhelpful emphasis on sin.

Being raised in churches that were informed by that understanding led Debie Thomas to salvation not once or twice, but many times. In fact, in her book on which this sermon series is based she starts her chapter on sin with the story of how she was so preoccupied with her sins and so desirous of the gift of

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<sup>2</sup> Marcus Borg. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored* (HaperOne, 2011), p.11.

salvation that she was saved on five different occasions between 1981 and 1987.<sup>3</sup>

Since I was raised in a Mainline denomination, I was spared life in this religious realm except that no one who spent the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s or frankly any time since in Texas is truly exempt.

My strangest experiences as a guest in that world came at this time of year a few decades ago. I found myself attending a haunted house – but not just any haunted house – a Christian one that was heavily influenced by this heaven and hell framework. And not just any such hell house, but one that was featured in the New York Times and has since been called the original.<sup>4</sup>

As we went from room to room in this oversized “house,” we were confronted with sin after sin. Each room brought all of the attendees in close proximity to actors who were tasked with scaring the hell out of the primarily teenaged audience. And the sins grew worse and worse until we reached the final scene. Rather than exit as one might do in a haunted house, the experience culminated with the opportunity to be saved. Yes, indeed, we could step right up and receive salvation.

Siblings in Christ, we have a sin problem. And part of that problem is the prevalent heaven and hell framework that has shrunk sin into something smaller than it actually is. And, so, today, I hope to, in the words of Marcus Borg, redeem it. I hope to challenge you to reconsider the term.

Marcus Borg suggests that we start by demoting sin. By this he means that it should not be the primary starting point.<sup>5</sup> And, he suggests that our concepts of sin need to be expanded. Put differently, this is to say that we must not get so hung up on personal or individual sin as to forget about the many other forms

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<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas. *A Faith of Many Rooms: Inhabiting a More Spacious Christianity* (Broadleaf Books, 2024), p.83.

<sup>4</sup> See my blog post “Halloween at the Hell House Halloween at the Hell House” for more on this topic. Available at <https://sowhatfaith.com/2011/10/27/halloween-at-the-hell-house/>

<sup>5</sup> Borg, p.144.

of sin like institutionalized sin, systemic sin, and the sin that is baked in or built in to our society.<sup>6</sup>

And, Debie Thomas couldn't agree more. She's come to a much more expansive understanding, which is evidenced as she writes

In Scripture, sin is not primarily about us making mistakes or choosing poorly, or missing the mark, or taking wrong turns. Sin is the reality of our universe, the layered zeitgeist of human life.<sup>7</sup>

And, like Dr. Borg, she admits that this is complicated and complex but encourages us not to use that as an excuse to discard the word sin all together.

As someone with relatively limited experience in the Lutheran tradition, I'm grateful for our liturgy. If you've been Lutheran for very long at all you have encountered the word "sin" many times. You have confessed your sin many times. And importantly you have received forgiveness just as many times. And, if you have paid attention, you've also been reminded that sin is bigger than what you do or do not do.

In the sixth chapter of Romans, we are confronted with our own sins and reminded that knowing better means doing better. Rather than focusing on our sin or the sinful world or systems around us, this passage invites us to remember our baptism – to remember that we have been marked with the cross of Christ forever. And to be reminded that this has ushered us into a realm marked by God's amazing grace.

And, in Mark's Gospel we are reassured that Jesus chose to spend his limited time here on earth hanging out with sinners. And, that he was always all about inviting people to follow him. Heck, you might even get away with summarizing the Gospels as an invitation to salvation – as a way of getting to know Jesus so that we might live and love like he did.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.146

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, p.86.

It turns out Dr. Prothero was right: we have a sin problem. The problem is bigger than his formula suggests. It is grander than the heaven and hell framework allows. And, it has never been all about us.

He was also right that we have a salvation solution. The key to experiencing it, however, is to start now rather than to wait for the life to come.

Amen.