

“Are Some Sins Bigger Than Others?”

Romans 6: 1-4, 12-14

Matthew 5: 21-26

People of the Lie, pg. 70-71 by M. Scott Peck

Rev. Brian Heron

Eastminster Presbyterian Church

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If I didn't feel guilty about shortchanging you I would make this the shortest sermon in history. The question for our dialogue sermon today was, “Are Some Sins Bigger Than Others?” Without having to wrestle too hard with this question the clear answer is an unqualified, “Yes!” The epistle lesson today doesn't say it directly, but indirectly it clearly assumes that some sins are worse than others. Romans 6 says, **“What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?”** Some versions read, **“Should we sin the more that grace may abound the more.”** The assumption is that God's grace covers all sins, no matter how many and how big. So why not then “sin the more that grace may abound the more.”

The clear answer to today's question is, “Yes, some sins are bigger than others.” It may seem like an overly obvious question. But, I have a feeling I know where the question comes from. Despite what I would imagine to be general agreement about a hierarchy of sins, our theology does muddy the waters slightly. Just three chapters before our reading, in Romans 3, Paul also writes one of our more quotable verses, **“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift.”**

And, of course, in Jesus Sermon on the Mount we have what seems to be the equalizing of sins. He says, **“You have heard it said that murder will bring judgment, but I say to you that if you are angry with one another, you will be liable to judgment.”** He goes on to add adultery to the list saying that if you even look at another with lust you have committed adultery. In another section we know that a woman was about to be stoned for committing adultery and Jesus stopped them saying, **“Anyone who is without sin cast the first stone.”** And that stopped them right in their tracks.

All of these passages seem to point to the possibility that the Bible actually equalizes sin. Murder and anger both are liable to judgment. Both the act of adultery and the thought of adultery constitute unfaithfulness. Jesus can stop a mob simply by saying, “If you are without sin, then go ahead and throw the first stone” Can you imagine this ethic in any of our courtrooms? A defendant is found guilty of robbery and kidnapping and the judge's direction to the jury is, “Before sentencing, just consider whether you have ever done anything wrong yourself.” Of course, we all know exactly where our mind would go next: “Well, I've done a few things wrong, but, never anything as bad as that!”

I want to invite you now into a dialogue about the nature of sin and want to handle as many questions as we can.

Questions for Reflection/Dialogue

What exactly is sin? How would you define it?

Why does the Presbyterian Church have a Corporate Prayer of Confession?

What is the doctrine of original sin?

Should people be held accountable for their sins?

What is the role of forgiveness with regard to sin and wrongdoing?

I want to end with a story that I think captures the Biblical approach to sin. Remember, yes, some sins are bigger than others. In our society that is very important. We want to make

sure that the worse sins get the worse punishments. The apostle Paul, however, is concerned not with the degree of our sins, but with the free gift of God's grace. He very clearly says that the greater the sin the greater the amount of grace that is offered. In the Bible the focus is not on punishment, but on redemption, grace, and reconciliation.

Here is a story by Todd Frankel in the St. Louis-Dispatch from March 19th.

He didn't know what to expect. He was sick with dread. His eyes were bloodshot from crying. Aaron Poisson was returning to the *Starbucks* where two years earlier his actions had killed another man. He didn't have to be here. He had served his time. Now 21, Poisson spent nine months in jail after pleading guilty of fatally running over Roger Kreutz, a customer trying to stop Poisson as the young man fled this coffee shop off Watson Road with a stolen tip jar containing less than \$5. He says he didn't intend to hurt Kreutz and didn't know until days later what he had done.

Accompanied by his father, Poisson was headed back to the Starbucks, to a ceremony to spread Kreutz's ashes below a memorial tree planted just yards from the fatal scene. Kreutz's extended family and dozens of friends were there. Poisson feared their anger, their hatred. *"But it feels like something I have to do,"* said Poisson, wearing a sweater and black slacks, as though he were headed to church. *"It's something I want to do."*

Poisson and his father, Gary, had driven up the day before from their home outside Atlanta, where Poisson had found work at a burger chain. On Friday afternoon, they stepped from their truck into the *Starbucks* parking lot. Before they could reach the door, a brother of Kreutz's stopped them. He embraced the father. He hugged the son. The two men held tight.

"Good to see you," Chris Kreutz said. "Glad you're here."

They spoke in low tones, Poisson's face reddening as he began to cry.

"Thank you," Poisson said.

"You're welcome."

This was the second meeting between the two men who had suffered in such different ways. The day after Poisson was released from jail in October, they talked for almost two hours in a meeting arranged by Chris Kreutz and Poisson's father, who themselves had developed a unique relationship over the intervening months.

"It's about reconciliation," Gary Poisson said.

"This is part of my healing," Chris Kreutz explained. "We're trying to do the right thing, to move on and carry on."

Another brother of Kreutz's walked over to Poisson and hugged him. Then another family member. And a friend. Then a brother's wife. More friends followed. They hugged him and assured him they were glad he was there. Poisson, a tall man with straight black hair swept over his forehead, teared up with each embrace.

About 45 people then walked across the drive-through lane and stood around a Forest Pansy redbud tree. A small plaque for Kreutz at the ground read, "Friend and Patron." Family took turns spreading ashes. Gary Poisson followed. Then Aaron Poisson gripped the small spoon to gingerly spread the gray ashes.

The ceremony was brief. Poisson, still standing in the emptying parking lot, sounded stunned. "The family is too gracious," he said. "I'd never ask it from anybody. I'd never expect it from anybody."

Some sins are bigger than others...which is what makes grace so amazing. Aaron Poisson didn't deserve to be forgiven for accidentally killing Roger Kreutz. None of us deserve forgiveness since "all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." But for God it's not about the degree of sin. It's about how much grace is needed to restore us to God and to reconcile with us each other. It's about how much forgiveness is needed to heal our broken hearts, broken relationships, and broken world.

I found this wonderful prayer that I'll close with.

"Dear God, so far today, I've done all right. I haven't gossiped and I haven't lost my temper. I haven't been grumpy, nasty or selfish, and I am really proud of myself. But, in a few minutes, God, I am going to get out of bed and from then on I am probably going to need a lot of help from you. Thanks God! Amen."