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Why don't we talk about 'sin' anymore in progressive Christian contexts?

Sherry Coman*

I've been thinking about sin. I've been thinking about how I don't really hear the word much these days in my life of faith. Sure it comes up sometimes in the lectionary readings; we say the word twice in the traditional Lord's prayer. But it has been my experience over the last number of years that we don't talk about it. I am not really sure anymore what we are saying about it. What we believe. And in what ways we believe it.

What is the role now of sin in our Lutheran faithful discourse? Are we engaging it in our conversations or sermons, or do we leave it discreetly out and drive by it in our text preparations, the way we might move too quickly through a yellow traffic light?

There might be a number of good reasons for avoiding it. It could be that we have heard sin associated with judgement. "Love the sinner, not the sin", was a phrase I heard often when I did LGBT advocacy in the wider church in the 1980s and 90s. Or, "are those two unmarried people "living in sin?"

On the other hand, perhaps we have grown accustomed to the way the word has become a passive part of our cultural idiom, used without any real relationship to its deeper meanings. "That wallpaper is ugly as sin," someone might say. We may fear being perceived as having a theology more conservative than it is. Or perhaps we have that conservative theology but are afraid of revealing it in more liberal contexts. Perhaps we're just afraid — period. Perhaps we're afraid of that word, sin.

In today's Gospel, we hear a story of someone who has been accused of something unlawful, according to the 613 commandments that a good Jewish leader of this time would know by heart, all of them directly from the Torah. In this passage, the religious leaders and others are challenging Jesus by invoking Deuteronomy 17, in which we hear that it is indeed lawful to put to death, particularly by stoning, someone who has transgressed the laws of the community of faith.

Deuteronomy is one of the later books of the Torah; I don't mean sequentially, I mean in terms of when it was believed to be written. The Torah was transmitted for centuries orally, but scholars believe the coherent book was established between the fifth and seventh centuries before the common era. So much of Deuteronomy, that 'deutero' 'nomos' second law, is an attempt to more progressively rework the laws of Exodus and Leviticus.

Leviticus 20:10 says plainly that anyone caught in adultery should be put to death. Deuteronomy 17 says, "okay, hang on. Let's put some parameters around this. Let's add, "but you have to be absolutely sure about it. You are accountable to God for this."

Deuteronomy 17 adds to Leviticus that there have to be at least two witnesses. And, if you have any doubt at all, you have to bring it before a Levitical priest or temple judge and

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let them call it. If the high priest says “yes, the person is guilty,” the most aggrieved accusers, those two required witnesses, must be ready to throw the first stones.

And so the authorities are coming to Jesus and saying, “be our judge. Tell us what to do here.” Wary of Jesus, worrying about his impact on their community, they are looking to entrap him. If he takes up the task and decides one way or another on the case, he will have acted as if he’s a high priest. And so begins a clever and careful rabbinic exchange among the authorities, and Jesus. How will Jesus get himself out of this one?

But wait. No. No, that’s not really what’s going on here. What’s going on here, is that a woman’s heart is beating?

A woman is being held in judgement without any agency or power, without any ability to control the future of her life. Her story, whatever it may be, has been co-opted into an intellectual debate about law and process of the law. She has ceased to exist. She has become an idea, even perhaps to Jesus, as he navigates his path.

Twice we hear that Jesus draws something on the ground. Scholars have long wondered what Jesus is doing when he does this. What are the words or perhaps an image that he is making there? For the woman, the gesture might be especially frightening. One way of stoning someone was to dig a pit, bury the person up to the head, and then stone the head. Is Jesus starting to dig the pit? What word is Jesus making in the ground that could possibly overcome that fear?

But we know. Jesus IS that Word. Jesus carries the knowledge of himself as a part of God. Whatever that word in the dirt may be, it is the very opposite of a stoning pit. The sacrificial love of Jesus is already present, is already finding ways to transform death. Jesus has not yet died. Jesus is trying to prevent a death, even as he knows that he will die. He will die because of moments like this one.

Jesus also knows that the process in that progressive Deuteronomic version of the law means that if he or any high priest is being approached at all, it’s because they’re not completely sure about the ‘sin.’ That’s the whole reason you go to the high priest: there’s some dispute about the offence. And so Jesus suggests that the two required witnesses, if they are so sure, go ahead. Go ahead and be ready to be accountable to God if they get it wrong. He is saying, “if you two key witnesses are without the sin of exaggeration about this woman, if you are sure you are not mistaken, that you did not accost her with accusations just so you could have a means of entrapping me; if you are not lying in front of God — about this woman — then go ahead! Cast those first stones you’re entitled to cast.”

And meanwhile, a woman’s heart is beating. Whose side is he on?, she wonders. That’s a pretty huge risk he takes with her life.

What are our laws of faith? If we are committed to the one who drew a word in the sand, the one who is the primordial breath and spirit of Creation, the one who is the Word made human; if we follow the one whose sacrificial love is already, all the time, present with us in any conundrum of our lives, — then we know that we are actually for the woman in this scene. We are the ones, in a modern context, helping her find good legal representation, helping her to step out of the stoning pit, and also the pit of whatever brought her to this moment of her life. We are the ones who hold authorities accountable for what they are doing. We are not the ones debating the law, but the ones doing something about its repercussions.

If we don’t talk about sin, how much will we be willing to be accountable to the universal sins we are a part of: — of colonization, of systemic racism, of climate catastrophe?

How willing will we be to say, "I am a part of that sinfulness when I don't work for reconciliation, when I fail to acknowledge my own racism, when I don't fight for climate justice?"

Jesus came to transform death for us all. On the morning of the third day after his death, it is a *stone* that has been moved at the tomb of Jesus, to reveal his absence. No stone can entrap Jesus in death. The resurrection of Jesus transforms the stones of harm into the stone that reveals new life. Jesus always prefers life over death. Jesus knew his own death was coming, as he worked to prevent the death of this woman. The death and resurrection of Jesus is present in the life of the woman in this story, as it is always present for all of us.

Our job is to work with Jesus. And in order to work with him, I think we have to acknowledge that 'sin' exists. The woman in today's story would tell you that to be indifferent to the word 'sin' is actually a point of privilege. It means that perhaps we have never been accused of it. The word 'sin' has been used as a weapon, as a way of othering people, of saying they are unworthy of God's love, of saying that they don't 'belong' to God. And we hopefully, are filled with remorse about these things. But does that mean we should just get rid of the word?

When the scene has disbursed and the accusers are gone, Jesus and the woman are alone together. And when Jesus asks her, "has no one condemned you?" And when she replies that no one has, he says, "neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." The Greek word for sin in this sentence has the alternate meaning of 'wandering from the law of God'. The sentence is a play on words: 'go your way, but don't wander *away* from God.'

Now, in my mind, it would not make much sense to simply resume using the word, holding traditional or vague embedded notions of what we think it means. Instead, I am inviting us to carefully, gently, hold the word sin again, letting it be uncomfortable, letting it disrupt our fears — and have conversations about what it means to us now. By doing so, we might become better able to carry the sacrificial love of Jesus — into the world. How can we have conversations about what the word actually means to us now, here, in 2023?

Where are we in this story?

Amen.