



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

760 East Broad Street • Columbus Ohio 43205 • (614) 221-6552 • fax (614) 221-5722 • www.bspsc.org

“A Summer Sermon on Sin”

Romans 7:15-20, Matthew 11:28-30

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Reverend Amy Miracle
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, OH

It promises to be a hot summer day – the perfect time, I believe, to talk about sin. Not in the abstract, but in all of its glorious particulars. How about if I take the handheld microphone down among you and we all do a little sharing? You are invited to share with these good folks your sins – the more detail the better.

It won't be boring. It's a known fact that sin is more interesting than piety. I read all of Dante's *Inferno* but not one word of his book about heaven. Here is an incomplete list of movies with the word sin in the title: *Sin City*, *Sin, the Movie*, *Original Sin*, *Sin by Silence*, *Past Sins*, *Forbidden Sins*, *Forgotten Sins*, *Secret Sins*, *Family Sins*, *Sins of the Father*, *Sins of Our Youth*, *A Touch of Sin*. That's a lot of sin. So, let's take some time and share our sins. Is it my imagination or did the temperature just go up a few degrees?

Of course, what I propose won't work. It's not just that we value our privacy but does anyone sin anymore? We commit errors in judgment. We make mistakes. We miscalculate.

There was a time when people sinned. Jonathan Edwards was an 18th-century Presbyterian minister and a leader in the religious movement known as the Great Awakening. He was known for his vivid depictions of sin and its consequences. Here is an excerpt from his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

... men are held in the hand of God, over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked ...the devil is waiting for them, hell is gaping for them, the flames gather and flash about them, and would fain lay hold on them, and swallow them up...¹

We in the church don't talk that way anymore. And that's a good thing. Over the years, the word “sin” has so often been associated with judgment and guilt. It is a word that has been used too often as a stick with which to hit people over the head.

We have not talked much about sin lately. We assume that we are basically good people who are making progress. I'm OK, you're OK.

The only problem is that's just not true. I can speak with authority about one half of that equation. I'm not O.K. Never have been and never will be. I am a sinner – not just a person who occasionally does bad things – but a sinner.

I've known this for a long time. I'm going to tell you a story. I've shared this story before. I don't particularly like telling this story because...well... I don't come across well in it.

I was maybe twelve years old and alone in the house. It was hot and humid. I was bored and irritable. Our dog, the family pet, faithful and true, was there with me. He sat there on the floor, head tilted to one side,

¹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/edwards_jonathan/Sermons/Sinners.cfm.

gazing at me with so much love and trust. I reached down and slapped the dog hard across the face – for no reason at all. As I did so, I felt a surge of power and autonomy, a rush of intoxication. I did it again. Then I stopped – I guess you could say that I came to – horrified at what I had done. I had looked deep into myself and realized that I was capable of just about anything.

The apostle Paul puts it this way. “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

Preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way. “Deep down in human existence, there is an experience of being cut off from life. There is some memory of having been treated cruelly, and – a little deeper, perhaps – the memory of having treated someone else cruelly as well. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of seeing the light and turning away from it, either because it is too beautiful to behold or because it spoils the dank but familiar darkness. Deep down in human existence there is an experience of reaching for forbidden fruit, of pushing away loving arms, of breaking something on purpose just to prove that you can.”²

For ages and ages, this has been called sin. It is a name for the experience of being cut off from air, light, sustenance, community, hope, meaning, being separated from God and from each other. Sin is the word we use to measure the full distance between who we were created to be and who we really are.

Our problem is not that we have a few minor flaws that need to be modified. Our problem is not that we occasionally slip up and do something we know we should not do. Our problem is that we are fundamentally predisposed toward the wrong. As individuals, as families, as a church, as a community, as a nation, there are a thousand ways to turn away from the light – but we all do it. We do it alone. We do it together.

In our day-to-day experience of ourselves, the hard facts of history, the failures of even our best intentions, it is clear. Sin abounds. Even when we are at our best, we are incomplete, we fall short, we miss the mark. We are sinners.

About now, Doug and Sarah, you may be wondering about this choice of topic for this particular Sunday. You and the rest of your family are far too polite to say anything but you may be thinking something like... “Really, Amy? Surely baptism is all about babies and new life and hope and the future, and all that stuff is the opposite of sin. Why talk about sin the day of Ivie’s baptism?”

The truth is that I don’t have the courage to talk about sin without this font – this water – this sacrament of baptism. Without baptism and what it represents, we are lost.

The sacrament of baptism is all about a love that is more powerful than our sin. This sacrament celebrates the truth that, before we are capable of responding, God reaches out and claims us in love. In baptism, God says, “you are mine and I love you now, always, forever.”

The amazing thing is that God knows all about our sin and still loves us. God’s love for us is not some fragile thing that can be shaken by something as predictable as our sin. Do you think any one of us has the imagination and originality to shock God when it comes to sin? Think about it. God has seen it all – from the Huns to the Nazis – Jack the Ripper and Agent Orange and the genocide in Rwanda. God has seen strip mining, human

² Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching Repentance at the Start of a New Millennium,” *Journal for Preachers*, Volume XXIII, Number 2, Lent 2000, p. 5.

trafficking, road rage and mass shootings. God is familiar with the depths of human depravity. God knows just how deep sin runs in us and yet (and this I do not understand) God still loves us and claims us as God's own.

God doesn't sit back and say, "Hmm – we'll see how Ivie does. If she doesn't sin too badly, I will still love her. But if she really messes up, the deal is off." No, that is not how God loves. Ivie is already forgiven. Already claimed as God's own.

The poet Wendell Berry looked back on a lifetime of rebellion and said to God...

[you] forgave me before I could act,
causing me to smile now, looking back,
to see how paltry was my worst,
compared to your forgiveness of it³

Sin is real. God's forgiveness, God's grace is even more real.

Our job is to receive this forgiveness. To welcome this grace into our lives.

From the font we can hear Jesus' words to us from this morning's other reading.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.

Jesus is talking to us. Inviting us to put down our burden of guilt and regret and fear and shame. Putting all that down sounds so very, very appealing.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.

We put down those burdens in order to embrace the forgiveness offered us by Jesus, to receive the mysterious strength God lends human beings who are interested in learning to sin a little less.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.

There is in the water of baptism an infinite supply of divine forgiveness, an unending fountain of grace.

Unearned grace. Amazing grace.

³ Wendell Berry, "To My Mother," *Entries*, 1994, p. 23-24.