

HE BECAME SIN

2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10

Ash Wednesday

February 17, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for Ash Wednesday comes from *Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, beginning at chapter 5, verse 20b, and reading through chapter 6, verse 10. In this Scripture, Paul reveals the shocking reality of Christ's atonement. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 2 Corinthians 5, beginning at verse 20b, we read in Jesus' name.

^{20b} We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

^{6:1} Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ² For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³ We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

You are dying. This is an unavoidable truth that every person must accept. And if you do not accept this truth, there will be no hope of escaping it. And when I say that you are dying, I do not simply mean that there will come a moment sometime in your future when your heart will stop beating, your lungs will stop breathing, and your brain will stop sending impulses. That will probably happen. But I'm not just talking about your future. I'm talking about your present. You *are* dying. We are all dying. At this very moment, you are in the process of dying. You have been in this process since the moment you were created.

In King David's most famous confession he says,

“Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 51:5).

David doesn't mean that his mom was an adulteress. She wasn't, at least, not in the way we typically think of them. No; David means that he was a sinner from the moment he was conceived. Simply by virtue (or maybe we should call it “vice”) of being descended from Adam and Eve, he was a sinner.

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And there is a clear and definite link between sin and death. This goes all the way back to the beginning when Adam and Eve decided they wanted to be like God. They ate the devil's sacrament, and they began to die. God warned them that they would die (Gen. 2:16-17), and they did. They didn't drop dead on the spot. Rather, at that very moment the process of death began. And I'm not really sure which is worse.

For King David, and also for us, the process of death begins at the very moment we begin to exist: conception. Death is a process that begins at conception. Life begins at conception, and, therefore, death does too. You and I have never experienced a moment in which we have not been dying. You are dying, and you have been your entire life.

We know this theologically, but we also know it by observing the world and the way it works. People grow up quickly, and then they start aging their way toward death. Most of us spend the majority of our lives on the downward side of the slope. It's a constant reminder of where this is going. Every sickness, every ache and pain, every time the scale says something you don't want it to say, that's the voice of God, speaking through your body, that you are dying. In this way we observe the process of death.

But, tragically, we also see that the young are not immune to it. Even children get sick and die. Sometimes they might die suddenly. The vast majority of child deaths occur before they are even born, sometimes by miscarriage, and sometimes by the choice of adults. These deaths usually go unnoticed, and parents are left to grieve alone. Though often hidden, these deaths reveal that all human beings live under the curse of death. Death is a process that begins at conception.

We observe this with our naked eyes, but we can even see it under the microscope. The cells of our bodies are constantly dying and being replaced. This begins, not when we begin to see aging around 25 or 30, but from day one in your mother's womb. Even while we are growing up, we are experiencing the scientific process of death.

You are dying. And you have been dying your entire life.

The reason for this is that you are a sinner. Sin and death are necessarily linked. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). We are dying because we are sinners. If we were not sinners, we would not die. We die because we are sinners. And I didn't say, "We die because we sin." Nope. We die because we are sinners.

I should probably explain the difference. Sometimes we have an atomistic view of sin. What I mean is, we think of sin as our individual bad actions. *I hit my sister, I cheated on a test, I looked at a bad website, I yelled at my kids for having too much fun, or I sluffed off at work.* Those are all sins. But those individual sins are not our biggest problem. They are symptoms of the bigger problem. The bigger problem is that we *are* sinners.

So think about this: Are we sinners because we sin, or do we sin because we are sinners? In other words: does our sin make us sinners, or does being a sinner make us sin? It's the second one. Being a sinner makes us sin. Our nature is the core problem.

We usually have this reversed in our minds. We think of all our individual sins as the gradual accumulation of dirt. We mistakenly think of human beings as a blank slate or a clean start. And as we go through life, we sin and pick up dirt from the world around us. That would be like taking a shower in the morning, and then progressively getting dirtier and dirtier as the day goes on and we pick up dirt from the world around us. But that's the wrong way to look at it. We don't out start as a clean or a blank slate. We start as sinners. And so the individual sins we commit are not isolated events where we gradually pick up dirt from the world around us. It actually goes the other way. We are the source of the dirt. It's more like you roll out of bed a

stinky and rotten piece of garbage, but replace the word “garbage” with something more vulgar. And everything you touch becomes contaminated with your filth. That’s a more accurate way to visualize your life and your relationship with your sin. They’re not isolated events that progressively make you dirtier. Rather, they are manifestations of your inner filth. I hope you understand what I mean. Your actions do not contaminate your nature. Your nature contaminates your actions. Your sins are not dirt going into your hearts. Your sins are dirt coming out of your hearts (Matt. 15:19). We sin because we are sinners.

So we should not think of sin merely as our actions. The problem is much bigger. It is who we are. It’s our nature. So it has to do with much more than our actions. It’s all of our brokenness. Sin is our fallen state of being. It’s us not being the way God designed us to be.

So we suffer from our sin just as much as we commit sin. It even includes our loneliness, depression, anxiety, weakness, despair, grief, and everything else. And please be careful to understand what I’m saying here. I’m not saying that all of those states of mind are sins in the sense of the bad actions we do. That’s the false and narrow definition of sin. I’m saying we need to broaden our definition of sin to include everything that is broken and fallen and wrong about us.

And so when we come to confess our sins, we do not merely confess the individual bad actions we do. We confess our entire being. We confess that we are not the way God designed us to be. We suffer from sin. We suffer loneliness, despair, weakness, grief, selfishness, and, yes, there are also bad actions that flow out of this fallen state.

So there are two basic components of sin, and we need to confess both of them. First, we confess our nature, “That we are by nature sinful and unclean.” Second, we confess our individual sins, “That we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.”

There are dangerous and deadly errors of neglecting either of these components. First, if we neglect the problem of our nature and think of sin merely in terms of our bad actions, we will be led to think that we can solve our problem by just not doing the bad actions anymore. This practically removes the need for a Savior, because, in this system, we save ourselves by not doing the bad actions anymore. The problem, though, is that we are in bondage to sin. It is our nature, and we can’t free ourselves. We must confess that our nature is sin. And we must confess that our nature is the source of our individual sins. If we neglect the problem of our nature, we will think we can save ourselves. This is a dangerous and deadly error.

But there’s another dangerous and deadly error on the other side. We might use the doctrine of our sinful nature to absolve ourselves of any real guilt regarding our individual sins. We think, *I’m a sinner, and I can’t help but be a sinner. I’m never going to change my nature, and I’m really no different than anyone else, so I don’t need to feel guilty for any of my individual sins. They’re just the product of my sinful nature. Sinful nature’s gonna do what the sinful nature’s gonna do.* This dismisses the fact that you actually did all the bad stuff you did. We are accountable for those things. And it kind of treats the sinful nature as a separate entity from ourselves, like there’s some uncontrollable force in you, and you’d like to contain it, but you can’t. No; when we talk about the sinful nature, we’re not talking about some uncontrollable force that is distinct from us. No; we’re talking about us. When we say something flows from the sinful nature, that means it flows from us. It is our nature. We must confess, *“I did those things.”* The doctrine of the sinful nature does not absolve us from the guilt of our individual sins. It does the opposite. It makes us naturally guilty. It reveals that we are in bondage. It doesn’t absolve us. Rather, it reveals our inescapable need for a Savior.

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So we hold both of these components of sin: “that we are by nature sinful and unclean, and that we have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed.” We confess both who we are and what we do. That is our sin. You are dying, and you are dying because you are a sinner.

For this reason, Jesus became sin. He took all that sin upon himself. He accepted all of it as his own. He became your natural sin, and he became your individual sins. 2 Corinthians 5:21 might be the most shocking verse in all of the Bible. “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” In my opinion those are the most shocking and beautiful words ever written. Shocking, because we like our God clean and pure. But Jesus actually became your sin. Hanging beaten, stripped, bloody, mocked, disgraced, and dying on a cross, Jesus did not pretend to be a sinner. He actually was. In his most glorious moment, he was anything but clean and pure. He became sin, and not just any sin, but your sin. “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin ...” Jesus became your sin, both your nature and your individual bad actions. And there on that cross, God condemned sin—your sin—in the flesh of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus became sin, and he died a sinner, condemned by God. Shocking.

When God the Father looked down from heaven on that cross, he saw all the sin of the world in one man. And it wasn't because he pretended to see it. He saw it because it was really there. And in that moment, the most just thing in all the history of the world was for God the Father to pour out all of his condemnation upon his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus did not pretend to be a sinner, and God the Father did not pretend to forsake him. Jesus became sin, and God the Father justly forsook him. Shocking.

And beautiful. “For our sake ...” “For *our* sake! ... so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” As impossible as it may seem for the Son of God to become sin, it seems equally impossible, but oh so beautiful, that we might become his righteousness. Just as Jesus did not merely pretend to be a sinner, so also, God does not merely pretend that you are righteous. He declares that you are the righteousness of God, and so you are. When God the Father looks down on you, he does not pretend that you have the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He sees the righteousness of Jesus in you, because Jesus has truly given it to you. It is yours today and forever. So God is perfectly just to love you, and to call you his child, and to reserve your place of inheritance in the new creation. “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

When you come to the Lord's Supper, you will receive in your mouth the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This is the same body and blood that became sin for your sake. It is given to you now so that you might receive the righteousness of God. You are dying. And you are dying because you are a sinner. For this reason Jesus became sin for your sake. In exchange, you have become the righteousness of God, and you will live in this righteousness forever and ever. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.