The Prison of our Sin

"... where for forty days, Jesus was tempted by the devil." Luke 4:1

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I am going to take a risk on this first Sunday of Lent. I am going to talk about ‘sin.’ And not only do I hope to talk about ‘sin,’ but even more foolishly perhaps, I shall endeavor to persuade you that ‘sin’ is still a theologically important category, a helpful and true way of talking about the human condition, even if the concept is, at the same time, in need of some serious rehabilitation. What makes this a risky strategy is the fact that our broader culture (perhaps especially in Cambridge, Massachusetts) is convinced that the language of sin is unspeakably out of date. Indeed, there are even priests in our Church who seem to choke on the word ‘sin,’ and seek to push it to the far reaches of our theological life. These critics insist that sin-talk is anachronistic, no longer useful for assessing the human predicament, and even worse, downright repressive and -- sin of all sins -- illiberal.

There are, of course, good reasons for these views and the Church itself, let’s confess it, is largely responsible for misusing and abusing the concept of sin in ways that have left generations of people not only deeply scarred, but profoundly alienated from the Church. Historically, the language of sin has been used to distort perfectly healthy forms of human sexuality and to condemn people whose sexuality is different from the heterosexual norm; it has been used to justify social institutions such as slavery by ruling classes eager to protect certain social arrangements by calling them divinely sanctioned; it has been used to subjugate women and to keep them from their rightful place in society and in the church; it has been used to explain mental and physical disabilities by so-called ‘normal’ folks eager to rationalize their own unwillingness to care for those who struggle with impairments of one kind or another; and from time to time the Church has used the language of sin as a way of wielding power over its people by terrorizing them into believing that if they did not conform their lives to a certain interpretation of Christian rectitude, then their souls would be in jeopardy of eternal damnation. Most of us, for example, read in a college Western Civilization class Jonathan Edward’s classic sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” a tour de force in using hellfire-and-brimstone rhetoric to “awaken” the religious sensibilities of complacent New England churchgoers.

And yet, if we attend more carefully to the biblical text, we see that sin is susceptible to another reading altogether, one that is less about the total corruption and depravity of humanity and more about a fracture or fissure in our nature that keeps us from being the people we are called to be. The Greek word for sin – hamartia – means literally ‘to miss the mark.’ Sin is thus a way of describing the gap between
what we aspire to and what we in fact do; the gap between who God wants us to be and who we are. We aim to be considerate, kind, and just in our dealings with others; but often, we end up acting thoughtlessly, giving in to mean-spiritedness, or favoring our own interests and desires over others. We strive to be reasonable, engaged and responsible in our conduct; but often, we act on irrational impulse, yield to laziness, or choose the expedient course over the right one.

The reasons for these discrepancies between our ideals and our actions are myriad and complex, of course, and frequently their sources remain obscure to even the most searching examination. As St. Paul puts it in Romans, "I [often] do not understand my own actions.... I can will what is right, but I cannot [seem] do it. [So often] I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." The Christian concept of sin insists that this fracture within the human soul of which St. Paul speaks – the gap between who I want to be and who I am – is a real and enduring brokenness, and one in need of God's gracious healing. We needn't fall into the despair of self-loathing to recognize this simple truth about the human condition.

Today's gospel reading about the three temptations of Christ is, on one level, a framework for understanding how some of the structures of sin routinely ensnare us. The devil tempts Jesus by urging him to misuse his divine authority in three different ways: in order to satisfy his own personal desires and appetites, to seek power over others, or vainly to achieve his own spectacular glory. Historically, commentators have interpreted these temptations as representing different types of sin – the lures of appetite, of power, and of glory – temptations to which we all regularly fall prey. In his humanity, Jesus fully feels the draw of these temptations; but in his divinity, he resists them. In each case, Jesus refuses to exercise his own freedom to satisfy his own needs or pursue his own agenda. Rather, he adheres to the Father's will, remaining grounded in a life of humility rather than hubris, a life of self-giving rather than of self-aggrandizement, a life offered for the good of the community rather than for individual gain.

On another level, within the broader narrative of the Bible, this story is a parable about the cosmic struggle for the human soul, with Christ redeeming what Adam had lost. For lurking in the background of this temptation story is, of course, that other story from Genesis. Whereas Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise into the wilderness for having yielded to the temptation of hubris, so Christ here, as the new Adam, goes into the wilderness on our behalf, and reverses the storyline, by selflessly resisting the temptation, so as to lead us from the wilderness back to paradise. For just these reasons, John Milton places these two temptation stories at the center of his poetic masterpieces, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*.

It would be a mistake, though, to view sin solely through the lens of our individual struggles with virtue and vice, or merely in terms of this cosmic drama of salvation with Christ as the new Adam. For there is another important dimension to sin: Deeply embedded in the biblical text is the view that sin is also a social reality. It is
not just that individuals are inclined to sin, and commit sins; it is that our social institutions are themselves subject to the vicissitudes of sin. Each of us is born into a social context which itself is plagued by a basic brokenness. We see, for example, in our own society a seemingly intractable gap between rich and poor; an educational system that fails to reach many of our most vulnerable children; a market-obsessed culture prone to commodify every aspect of human experience and objectify people to serve its utilitarian ends; institutionalized forms of racism and sexism and other structural biases in social arrangements that are designed to preserve power in the hands of some and take it away from others; and an environmental and energy policy built around values of dominion and exploitation rather than care and stewardship of the natural order.

All of these social dysfunctions – all of these –isms – are manifestations of sin precisely because they push us apart as human beings, alienating us from ourselves, from our natural world, and from God. Social sin is so insidious because of the power of its external reality. These social sins can so overwhelm us that we often feel impotent in their grasp. These social sins are so big and yet we seem so small.

As you know, I spend most of my time serving as chaplain to the Episcopal students at Harvard. Within our chaplaincy community, we have made it a priority this year to focus on one particular social sin as a focus for prayer, study, and action: namely, our badly broken prison system. Partnering with our Jewish friends at Harvard Hillel, in November we formed the Harvard Interfaith Prison Education project, nicknamed HIPE. HIPE is an interfaith coalition of Harvard graduate and undergraduate students committed to mentoring incarcerated women and men who are working towards their bachelor degrees through Boston University’s "College Behind Bars" Program, with the support of Partakers, Inc. HIPE currently has 21 members from many different schools within the University. Although started by our chaplaincy and Hillel, our members include not only Christians and Jews, but Hindus, Muslims, and a Buddhist. We are divided into 3 interfaith and inter-school teams, each assigned to mentor a different incarcerated individual.

During our project, we’ve learned a great deal about the American prison system: we’ve learned that America today imprisons more people (over 6 million) than Stalin did during the height of the Russian gulags; that America imprisons vastly more of her people than any other country on earth, both in total numbers and on a per capita basis, more even than China, a country four times our size; that more black men are trapped in our penal system today than were slaves in 1850; that more women are imprisoned in the United States than any other country on the planet; that every day more people wake up in the cruelty of solitary confinement in this country than could fill Fenway Park; and that America has begun to hand over its prison systems to for-profit-corporations whose economic incentives are the exact opposite of what they should be – their interest is to build as many prisons as possible, to incarcerate as many people as possible, and to keep them there for as long as possible, all to make a buck. This is sin, my friends.
But more important than these impersonal statistics, through their visits to Norfolk prison, our students have experienced in a very small way what life inside a prison is like and what it can do to a person. Through our relationships with our incarcerated companions, we have begun to put a human face on the prison system. We have listened to their stories, we have met their wives and children and brothers and sisters in the waiting room, we have shared their hopes and dreams for the future, we have sought to help them with their studies, and we have tried to be a friend along the way.

Our HIPE project is a very, very small step in an ongoing struggle with one form of social sin. But the truth is that the only way to combat sin, whether on a personal level or in a social context, is one small step at a time, one day at a time, all with God's help.

In a few minutes, during our Eucharist, we will pray as we always do that prayer Jesus taught his disciples. At the center of the Prayer is the plea, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” I invite you today, and throughout this season of Lent, to pray on these words, reflecting on all those temptations and evils in your own life that keep you from being the person God has called you to be. Let us all evaluate honestly the bad habits, destructive behaviors, and distorted attitudes that prevent us as individuals from connecting with God and with each other, and let us commit to some simple disciplines and practices that help us to draw closer to God’s heart.

But my prayer for us this Lent is that we don’t stop there. Let us consider not only our personal sins, but also the social sins that envelop us all. In honesty and humility, let’s shine Christ’s light in those darkest of corners of our social life – the poverty, the gun violence, the economic disparities, the prejudices, the pollution and waste, and yes, the prisons. Let us pray on these things too. And more than pray, let us open our hearts to God’s merciful power so that he might make us instruments, in small ways and big ways, to heal these fractures in our world and to be a balm for its sins, all for the sake of his son and our savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sources: For a compelling account of the American prison system that has informed our ministry, see Adam Gopnik, "The Caging of America," *The New Yorker* (Jan. 30, 2012). Our HIPE project is also deeply grateful to Partakers, Inc. (www.partakers.org), and its Executive Director, Arthur Bembury, for their support and guidance to our students.