

GOOD FRIDAY SERMON
Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19

One thing about preaching on sin, you don't have to make a case for its existence. All you have to do is open the morning news feed and you read all about it – violence, dishonesty, corruption, it's all there. In fact, sin is so prevalent, we're so used to it, that it can be hard to recognize it for what it is – especially when it shows up in ourselves.

Hardly anyone ever sets out intentionally to sin. It usually has a way of appearing good. The story in Genesis 3 is a masterful description. The serpent didn't entice the woman with riches or pleasures or all those things that we usually associate with temptation. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve didn't need any of those things because they trusted in God completely. What the serpent tempted her with seemed good - the possibility of being like God. The serpent assured her that if she ate from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she wouldn't need to rely on God. She could get by on her own, independent from her maker.

That's what gives sin its power. It disguises itself as good. The story of *The Lord of the Rings* is about a ring that gives the one who possesses it absolute power, but that power leads to evil. The only way the power of the ring can be overcome is if it is thrown into the fiery pit in the distant mountains where it was forged. The good wizard Gandalf tries to convince the young hobbit Frodo to take the ring back to the mountain and destroy it before it falls into the hands of someone who would use it to destroy the world. Frodo asks Gandalf why he doesn't hold on to the ring and take it to the mountain. Gandalf replies that he would be tempted to use the ring's power to do good, but the power of the ring was such that it would use his very desire to do good as a way to do evil.

Think of terrorist networks. Young jihadists are convinced their cause is good and just. They see themselves as avengers for righteousness. They're willing to die because they believe that a reward is waiting for them in paradise. They're convinced that it's their victims who are evil and they are good.

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And which of us doesn't do the same thing, if on a smaller scale? Who hasn't done something you were convinced was right only to find out too late that it was very wrong? Think of the things you've done that you are sorry for or ashamed that you did. Was there one of them that you didn't justify at the time that you had good reason to do it?

The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard said that trying to see our own sin is like trying to see our own eyeballs. We're incapable by ourselves of recognizing all the wrongs we do. We've got too much invested in it. God has given us a conscience and God has told us what is good. God gave us God's law to help us know right from wrong. We have no excuse for not knowing what is good and what is evil.

But we still fall short. In the seventh chapter of Romans, Paul describes that dilemma we all feel: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." All parents who have resolved to be more kind and loving to their children only to find themselves the next day losing their temper with them can understand what Paul means. There's something in us, what the Bible calls sin, that keeps us from living up to the standards we truly want to live by. We find that sin is as inevitable as death.

The Bible draws a close connection between sin and death. In fact, they're interrelated and dependent on one another. In the passage that we read today from Romans, it says that death came into the world through Adam. That doesn't mean that if he hadn't eaten the forbidden fruit we would all live forever. After a few generations the planet would get pretty crowded. But there's something about death as we experience it that is at odds with the way God created us.

The power death has over us is that it stands as an inevitable black hole before us, and on our own we're incapable of seeing beyond it. The way we experience death is as the complete break in a relationship. When a loved one

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dies, there's an empty place in our lives. Even though we're left with precious memories and strong values, death puts an end to relationships as we know them, and so we fear death because it robs us of what's most precious.

Genesis traces death's power over us back to the break in our relationship with God. Adam and Eve wanted to tear away all the mystery and put themselves in the place of God. Instead of trusting God, they tried to be in control. But once that relationship with God was ruptured, they saw how helpless they were in the face of death. They tried to hide from their mortality, but they wound up hiding from each other and from God. They sewed fig leaves to cover themselves, hiding from the very one who was bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh. They hid among the trees so God wouldn't see them, ashamed before the very one who made them in his own image.

Whether you believe that Adam and Eve were historical figures or archetypes for the human condition, their story is true. It's the story of you and me. It's borne out by our experience. We don't trust the power of truth, so we find ourselves telling lies. We don't trust that God will give us enough, so we grab for ourselves first and push others aside. And even if we follow the law of God to the letter, lurking right there in wait for us is the sin of self-righteousness and moral superiority.

Just as the power of the ring in *The Lord of the Rings* could only be destroyed by taking it back to the place where it was forged, the power of sin can only be overcome back at the source where it began. We can only become the people we long to be in our heart of hearts by restoring our relationship with God, by trusting God enough that we pursue truth and live in God's ways, unafraid of the consequences, without trying to reach out on our own to protect ourselves from the power of sin and death. When we try to do it on our own, we can't help but fall prey to the very things we try to overcome.

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That's why we need someone to bring us back to God. Our fear of death, the power of sin and its craftiness, make it too hard for us. It takes someone whose love and grace and obedience to God are stronger than death and sin.

So, God sent Jesus to restore that broken relationship with God. Jesus is like each of us, a human being. He understands temptation. Hebrews 2:18 says, "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested." He trusted enough that he was obedient even to death on a cross, knowing that even in death, God is faithful.

Jesus is an example for us to follow, yes, but we need more than an example. In his death he freed us from the power of sin. In his resurrection he restored that perfect relationship with God for which we were created.

Now, that doesn't mean that we're no longer tempted or that we no longer sin. It doesn't mean that death is nothing to us. It's still something we do our best to avoid and it's something that tears us apart when those we love die. But because of Jesus' perfect trust in God, because of his death and his resurrection, we know for certain that death doesn't have the final word for us. And because death, the worst that can happen to us, has been overcome in Jesus, we don't have to fear anything else. We don't have to be afraid to tell the truth. We don't have to be afraid to give of ourselves to others. We don't have to be afraid to live the way God wants us to live because we know through Jesus that we can trust God. We don't have to grasp and grab because we know God cares for us. No matter what life throws at us, God is faithful. Even when we walk in the darkest valley, we know God is there. We have confidence. We have hope. It's not too hard to live the life God wants you to live. Jesus has broken the power of sin. He sets us free. We're no longer bound by death because death has been nailed to the cross. That is what makes this Friday Good.