

THE FORGIVENESS OF SIN
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5th Sunday in Lent
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

John 12:20-33

"Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

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Hi, I'm Randy and I'm a sinner. And if this were an AA type meeting, what would you say? (Hi, Randy!) We could proceed person by person, pew by pew but we don't have time. You get the point.

I'm a sinner; you're a sinner. We are all sinners. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God or, we might say, we all fall short of love's potential. There is none righteous, no not one, says the prophet.

Let me ask you: do you know of even one perfect person? By the way, that's a rhetorical question. Please don't raise your hand like one man did in a certain church when the preacher asked that question. *Has anyone ever known of a perfect person*, asked the preacher? A man raised his hand. The preacher was incredulous but nonetheless asked the man who that perfect person might be. The man looked at the woman by his side and said, *my wife's first husband!*

Sure, we laugh but we also know better. We are all sinners.

Klutzes, criminals and sinners aren't exactly the same. Klutzes make mistakes. Criminals violate the law of the land. Sinners violate the law of love. Which is to say: we hurt, abuse and neglect ourselves and others. We do things we ought not to; we don't do things we ought to. Sins of commission; sins of omission. We should be ashamed. And most of us are.

And that's a good thing because guilt and shame are wonderful gifts. They tell us something is wrong. Of course, some people take way more guilt than they deserve. Others take way too little or none at all. Some are immune to guilt, shame and remorse. Such people we say are less than human.

It's complicated. There is false guilt and pathological shame. But true guilt and shame properly faced can lead to contrition, repentance and transformation.

Yes, we are all sinners. But we are not *sinners by birth* as the Psalm for this day implies and as some Christian traditions claim and thus rush to baptize infants in order to wash away their so-called "original sin" lest they go to Hell for being uncleansed from original sin.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51)

A sinner when my mother conceived me!?!

That's in the Bible and that's all it took to spawn a baptism business in the medieval church, that and a certain spin on Eve's snatch of the forbidden fruit as told in Genesis (chapter 3). The Church would eventually declare Eve the mother of all sin conveniently pinning evil on women. That's how certain men put two and two together, two Bible verses here, two there, and out comes a toxic system of dogma with a loud bark and a vicious bite. Little did those men know—or little would they admit—of other ways to read those Bible verses.

I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. Really?

Whoever said that or wrote it was, we can safely say, having a very bad day. It's what we call hyperbole. Most of us use language that way from time to time. *I'm so hungry I could eat a horse.* Really? Let's bring in a horse and see. *I'm so embarrassed I could crawl into a hole and die.* Really? No, not really. It's hyperbole. It's emotive speech.

I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. Really? No. It's not really my mother's fault. It just seems to me on certain days that I've messed up so much so often I can't remember ever doing anything right. I probably was sinning as a fetus! It's hyperbole. It's a way of speaking. It's part of biblical language. We need to give the Bible a break!

Much of Christianity's problems arise from turning good biblical poetry into bad prose and then turning the bad prose into theological dispositions that stifle, smother or enslave people, including enslavement to guilt and shame. Guilty people are easily manipulated.

Yes, Eve took the forbidden fruit. But look: *it's a mythic folktale to convey what all human beings are like.* Humans have an insatiable thirst for knowledge and nothing, including God, will stand in our way. It's our birthright. It's what distinguishes us from animals for heaven's sake. And, yes, it gets us into a peck of trouble. The ensuing vignettes (Genesis 3-11) make that abundantly clear.

But that doesn't mean we are fallen creatures per se. We have an *original blessing* not original sin. "Behold, it is good" includes humans! We are not sinful by nature; we are incomplete, still evolving. And, yes, we feel guilty and ashamed and try to hide behind all kinds of things. We put on airs and religion the way Adam and Eve put on "fig leaves" to cover their shame and guilt.

Welcome to the human race. We sin. And part of our sin is turning God into a monster, into a Mesopotamian style tyrant foaming at the mouth to punish and condemn us and others. Beware, beware, beware: human imagination is both delightful and diabolical.

But those days are over, says the prophet Jeremiah.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.

As it turned out, Jesus embodied that new covenant and enlarged it to include not just Israel but all people.

This is the covenant that I will make, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

That was spoken at a certain moment in time but is not just a moment in history long ago. It's about a moment in our lives. Many of us live under the "old understanding." And then one day the "new understanding" awakens in our hearts. It's the moment

grace touches your heart and mind and cleanses you of the notion that God is an angry Judge. It's the moment when you know that you are not a hopeless sinner but a redeemed child of God.

And that's salvation and that's the gospel! Did you hear it? Jesus died to drive that kind of ruler or god out of the world, out of our hearts and minds! *If I be lifted up, said Jesus, I will draw all people unto myself.*

And who is "Jesus" in the gospel of John? *I and the Father are one.*

What was lifted up from the earth on the cross? *The One we know as fully divine.* A God of love not a god of hate. A God of mercy not a god of torture. A God of inclusion not a god of exclusion. A God of acceptance not a god of rejection. A God of forgiveness not a god of condemnation.

My friends, look to Jesus. There is no condemnation. God has forgiven all. Yes, we mess up. But we are forgiven and entrusted with good work, including the good work of accepting our own forgiveness, the good work of forgiving one another and the good work of building the community in which love is honored and practiced.

Look to Jesus and be saved.