The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 28, 2026
Jeremiah 28:5-9, Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
Romans 6:12-23, Matthew 10:40-42

The Wages of Sin, and the Power of Grace

Today we're going to talk about sin. I'll bet that got your attention! Sin isn't a popular thing to bring up, even in church! I don't know about you, but for me it brings to mind ministers waving Bibles and preaching fire and brimstone sermons, calling us to repent, change our ways, or be condemned. Some denominations don't talk about it, and consider it an outdated, psychologically unhealthy term. For other reformed Christian traditions, particularly those with Calvinist roots, human beings are believed to be utterly depraved and corrupt from birth, and they can only be saved from damnation by the substitutionary death of Christ. All people are subject to original sin, a sort of inborn taint that gets in the way of a relationship with God.

This is not what the Episcopal Church believes. The catechism of our church teaches that "Sin is the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, thus distorting our relationship with God, with other people,

and all creation." There is a communal dimension to sin. And the story doesn't end there, for we have the great good news of grace and forgiveness. The catechism also teaches "Grace is God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved. By grace, God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, and strengthens our wills."

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul has a lot to say about sin and its consequences. Let's reflect a bit on that. This letter was probably one of the last ones he wrote, to a church he didn't found. The other letters he wrote were addressed to churches he had established and spent quite a bit of time in. However, he was still familiar with the needs, joys, struggles and conflicts that these early Roman believers were experiencing. The letter was probably circulated around 50 A.D., before the Gospel records. It is believed he was writing to a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile believers. The Jewish Christians had been living under the rule of the Law and the commandments, while the Gentiles were not bound those statutes. Paul wanted to make sure that these followers of Jesus understood the basics of the faith—that while they were yet sinners, Chrit died for them, that they had been baptized with

Christ in his death and shared the experience of his resurrection into new life, that there was abundant grace, but it wasn't to be presumed upon, and that sin had very real consequences, leading to spiritual death. In the next chapter, he writes candidly of the struggles he has with sin in his own life.

He cautions them not to presume on this grace and continue to live in sin because they are not bound by law. In other words, they are to live like those who are set free from sin. He uses the state of enslavement when talking about sin, which may make modern people feel uncomfortable. And yet slavery was common and quite visible in the society of the time, and it provided a vivid illustration that people could relate to. They were once bound, held captive in sin, and once they were set free from that bondage, they were able to choose instead to be a slave of righteousness. Because Jesus took unto himself our infirmities, our brokenness, our sin and weakness, and raised our human nature to new life through his death, they were then healed, restored and sealed, body, soul and spirit in the way of salvation and grace. He then goes on to talk about sanctification, or growing in grace into the new creation which

reflects the life of Jesus himself. This is indeed eternal life, and it begins here and now. An then he says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” If we turn from God, we are cut off from the very source of life and health, but God provides a way of restoration and healing.

So, how do we understand sin? There are many different ways of looking at it. I offer three ways of understanding it that I have found helpful.

The first is straight from the confession of sin in the Book of Common Prayer, things done and left undone. We fall into sin when we live as if God is not part of our lives, when we are unkind or judgmental toward others, when we show a lack of hospitality or respect in words or deeds. And then we passively miss the mark when we fail to commend the faith that is in us, and don’t speak out against injustice, or look away when we see a person in need of our care, love, and respect. We indeed have not loved God with our whole hearts, or our neighbors as ourselves.

The second is a turning away from God that puts a barrier between us and him. We may become indifferent, and God is pushed to the

periphery of our lives, God's ways and claim on us are put aside, and we no longer hunger for relationship and communion with God. And I must emphasize that the barrier is always on our side! God being our Creator, loves us, and always longs for us to freely respond back in love. We block off communication by our absence and indifference; God just isn't that important to us anymore. And from that place, all kinds of negative behaviors can grow: lack of love and charity toward our neighbors, resentment, unbridled competition, envy, judgment and the decision to guide our lives by our own lights, and without the humility to realize we cannot live loving and compassionate lives in our own strength.

And finally, sin is any action that separates us from the love of God, neighbor, or self. We do not always love the Lord our God with all of our heart, with all of our mind, and with all of our strength. Perhaps we have been indifferent to the needs of the poor and marginalized in our communities, in the workplace, not offering the dignity and respect that we all deserve as people created in God's own image. Remember when God created us, he looked at what he had made and saw that it was very good! Perhaps we judge people of other political persuasions,

religious beliefs, or sexual orientations. And when as communities and nations we judge people to be the dreaded "other", we create the conditions that perpetuate war and violence. Perhaps we have failed to have the courage to step out in faith and dare to let go of our fears and biases and truly listen to our enemies and try to find that precious common ground where the veil is lifted and we see not adversaries but brothers and sisters looking for the space to live. And what about separation from ourselves? I believe we sin against ourselves when we hide away parts of ourselves because they seem dark, broken, and wounded. There is a tendency for Christians to try to become one-sided, to be perfect, just as Jesus was perfect. But by perfect, he means whole, darkness and light, sin and gift, wholeness and brokenness, all the deep beauty held in grace, in the beloved people of God that we are. We are indeed walking on holy ground when we are in each other's presence, and we fall short when we forget this.

Sin inhibits our innate capacity for love. We are meant to live together in the circle dance of love, fellowship and joy. When we are disconnected from our deepest self in God, we isolate ourselves from

each other and the love of God in Jesus Christ. I believe that's what Paul means when he says the wages of sin is death. We become numb, unresponsive to the invitation to delight in and be in fellowship with others. We live unto ourselves, lonely, proud fortresses and can no longer receive the gift of the gracious love of God and others. Life becomes fraught with fear and despair. But it doesn't end with death, thanks be to God! Like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, God is running down the road to meet us in the midst of our sin, separation, and estrangement. He opens his arms to us, and he is filled with joy and welcome at our return. That is how our God is, and that is the heart of the Good News. Sin and death are swallowed up in overwhelming grace and forgiveness!

As our former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry famously said, "Love is a practice." Love is a practice. May we learn to move from living for ourselves alone into the joy of table fellowship with God and all our sisters and brothers. Amen.