

What is Sin?

Sermon delivered at the SF Swedenborgian Church, June 30, 2002
Psalm 51:1-17; Romans 7:14-25, Romans 8:26-27

Sin. No matter what our beliefs, that's a loaded word. Given the common association of sin with pleasure, maybe I should have titled this sermon, "What isn't sin?" I have never heard "Sinfully delicious" in reference to salad greens. "Sin City" is not a town known for its beautiful scenery. Religion has gotten reduced to arguments over which acts are going to send us to the Fiery Place, and which ones are going to win us a ticket to Cloud Nine. We want the definitive, ultimate list of Dos and Don'ts. We struggle with deeper questions -- What does it mean to violate divine law? What does it mean to be separate from God? Is sin something you do, or something you are? How then do we live to overcome sin and know God?

Where do we turn to understand what sin is? The Bible? Theologians? Which theologians? Mystics? Psychologists? Our parents? Judge Judy? Who can tell us the definitive truth about what sin really is, ancient people who spoke from visions of God in the pure, hot desert -- or modern ones, who know what it means to live in today's technological world? One thing is clear, regardless of whose truth you consider about the matter, sin is here to stay. Nobody has come up with a way to live a 100% guaranteed sin-free life. David's anguished lament, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me, against you and you only have I sinned, and done what was evil in your sight" and Paul's frustration that, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do" are more timeless and real than any list of Do's and Don'ts. Somehow, though, we walk around with a vague distrust of our own God-given humanity, in the name of guilt and repentance. Early desert monks sought total separation from earthly concerns by retreating to dark desert caves. Luther despaired over ever being worthy of God's grace, agonizing that no matter how hard he worked, he would never overcome sin. The fiery Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards gives us a vision of God holding humanity between extended thumb and forefinger, over a lake of fire.

Traditional Christianity tells us that we are doomed from the outset, and God's only son Jesus had to die a horrible death just for us. And even as we reject Jonathan Edwards' notions of sin, we still feel guilty -- about exercise, butter instead of Promise margarine, that home improvement project we've been putting off, how imperfect our kids are, how we feel about certain people. But on the other hand, in an effort to reclaim the humanity for which we were created in God's image, many in the post-modern world would advocate doing away with the whole notion of sin or wrong-doing altogether. God loves us all, don't worry-be happy, just try not to hurt anybody, but whatever you do is OK -- as long as you're not judgmental.

Clearly, we have come to a place where we are caught between two notions of sin, neither one of which seems to be leading humanity any closer to God. Neither view provides a satisfactory answer to the question, "How, then, shall we live, in order to know God?" Either we see ourselves as sinners that can never, ever achieve the perfection demanded of us by a vengeful God, doomed to repeated failure every day -- or we forget about the role of Divine Grace, and focus on self-development toward our own fully achievable psycho-spiritual goals instead.

Swedenborg offers us a view of sin that frees us from loathing ourselves, yet holds us accountable for our lives in the eyes of God. Like Paul, Swedenborg sees humanity as suspended in equilibrium between good and evil. Unlike Paul, Swedenborg affirms our free will to choose either path. In Swedenborgian theology, sin is the willful appropriation of evil (that is, whatever is contrary to God's creative and loving good -- not just Hitler evil) into our intentionality, knowingly acting only for the sake of our own self-interest. **We become what we do, and we shape our spirit by how we use it in our earthly life.** Swedenborg sees Original Sin as the denial that it is God alone who can guide us to goodness. "We can't get there from here" if we leave God out of our plans. We succumb to the serpent when we knowingly separate ourselves from the power of God, and try to control the world and our lives as if we

were the ultimate source of love and grace. Swedenborg's concept of sin presumes that we are able to know and experience God, and yet we act contrary to the divine order because of the motivating power of our own self-interest. It takes two to tango – us and God, and we've got to let God lead the dance.

How do we know what God's creative and loving good is, when it's all mystery? How can our sensual human experience be sinful, when it is only through our senses that the presence of God is known? It is through our sensual physical natures that we know loving friendship, kindness among strangers, the beauty of sunsets and forests, the beauty of music and architecture, harmony, mercy, creativity, justice, the Peace that Passeth all Understanding. The list goes on and on – think of all of the expressions of God's love and wisdom, and then think of what it is that keeps us from manifesting these characteristics ourselves. How often do we crowd our lives with tasks, in the name of responsibility, and don't have time for inner peace? How often do we worry so much about the future of our fortunes that we forget all about kindness or mercy or beauty? To what degree do we feel so guilty, and expect so much of ourselves, that we stay at work instead of coming home to paint or sing or dance or love? How often do we take on more than we can handle, and weaken ourselves in the attempt to take care of everyone? From a Swedenborgian perspective, self-denial, guilt, worry, and workaholicism can be sins to the extent that they ground us in our self-interest, instead of opening us up to the love of God and our neighbor. **It is not what we do, but the spirit in which we do it that makes for sin.** As Swedenborgian theologian George Dole says, **"The road to Hell is not paved with good intentions, it's paved with unexamined intentions."** Philanthropy can be a sin, if we are generous only to get our name in the newspaper. Ambition can manifest God's love, if it is used in the service of faith and love. It is our task to open our hearts to God, so that our actions may make God's love visible, so that perhaps even our sins may be used by God to good ends.

You can't think about sin without thinking about redemption. In Swedenborgian terms, awareness of sin begins the cycle of Repentance, Reformation, and Regeneration. Repentance begins with wanting to know something beyond the worldly desires that trap us in a vicious cycle of "Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places," as the song says. We are stung with the hot shame of realizing that we have done something really bone-headed, and that the sarcastic remark or the white lie is not just a social faux pas, it represents something we do not want to become, much less take on as our eternal spirit. Reformation begins with conscious attempts to act in a different way, trying repeatedly to be a different kind of person, someone that does divine things, not bone-headed things. Persistence in aligning our will with God's will leads us to take this renewal of life to heart, and we are regenerated as we act in harmony with God's will unconsciously, acting from faith because we love to do so, not for the material consequences. And then we recognize another sin, and the cycle begins again. Sin and redemption, in the Swedenborgian world, are an ongoing, dynamic journey, not a destination or state of achievement or failure. This perspective on sin offers us a way to get up each morning and strive to be, with God's grace, more aware of and able to move away from our sins than we were yesterday. We know we can only overcome sin by accepting God, and God knows we can only overcome sin by choosing another way. Regeneration is not something that God does to us, it is something God does through us. Like the motion of a bicycle wheel, each cycle of repentance-reformation-regeneration moves us a little closer to having a "clean heart, and a new and right spirit within us," as the Psalm says. God is the wind, we are the sails.

So, what a wondrous gift God has given us in our flawed humanity! Our sins -- what an ingenious system of inviting us toward the Divine Presence! We could not take the steps it takes to approach God, if it weren't for sin. Sin is the beginning of the process that leads us closer to God, if we choose. Sin is evidence that God is reaching out to each of us, showing us each our very own individual way to God, the way that is right for us. God came to

earth as Jesus to invite us to choose to be reborn in God. The urge to act from our own self-interest instead of in the interest of the divine gives us the chance to choose God over and over again, sculpting our spirits as we journey in this world. Sin is not something to fear or avoid in a cave. Sin is not something over which to despair, or a source of self-loathing. It is something to welcome as a special invitation from God to choose God over yourself! The German poet Rilke gives us an image of continuing on a path of “being defeated by successively greater and greater opponents.” The Persian poet Rumi says, “An empty mirror and your worst destructive habits, that’s when the real making begins, that’s what art and crafting are...Don’t turn your head, keep looking at the bandaged place. **That is where the light enters you.**”

So it is with sin. Once we have overcome one tendency to cling to our self-interest, we are faced with another, more subtle one. Yet, as we overcome greater and greater temptations, we are led to greater and greater joys. And it never ends. According to Swedenborg, even the angels fall into the trap of self-interest, feel remorse, and have the chance to choose God over themselves yet again.

So, what is sin? You know, in your heart of hearts, you know exactly what sin is for you. I can’t tell you what sin is, because I don’t live your life, and my path to God is not your path to God. Your sins will change as God coaxes you onward to master the claim that self (sin) has on you right now. But you know what sin is. You know that you know what sin is. Perhaps the most eloquent theological observation on sin I ever heard was from an autistic and severely developmentally challenged woman I worked with at Project Open Hand, who would repeat phrases that she had heard from her grandmother that morning. One day, she came in saying, “What does this mean – ‘ You know better than that?’ “ No one has said it better, not Paul, not Luther, not Swedenborg. What does this mean – You know better than that? And how, then shall we live in order to know God? Again, the most succinct insight comes not from a theologian, but from a man I befriended who had an IQ of around 35. He asked me to explain a

button I was wearing that displayed Art Linkletter's picture with the slogan "Art for Art's Sake." Knowing that someone with an IQ of 35 may not be capable of discerning irony, I merely read the slogan. And he responded, "Oh, heart for heart's sake." Yes.

What is sin? "You know better than that."

How do we live to overcome sin? "Heart for heart's sake."

Let us pray:

Holy Spirit, Source of All Life,

We are grateful for all the ways you appear to us, in the stunning epiphanies and in the small revelations. We thank you for your infinite, absolute, eternal love. Be with us as we go about our days, help us to see you in the faces around us. Help us to love you with our actions and words, as well as in our hearts and minds. Guide us away from our self-centered concerns, lead us into life eternal. In the name of the Risen Christ, may our sins and our failings be used in your service, and may all that is within us, not just our good parts, bless God's holy name.

Amen.