



Sunday Messages at Scarborough United Church

Lent 4

(Based on Psalm 32 and 2 Corinthians 5.16-21)

March 31, 2019

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Part 1

Today, we're really getting into the spirit of Lent. We're going to talk about sin. Before we get to far, let's make sure that we're all on the same page. Sin in the original sense of New Testament Greek (ἁμαρτία) hamartia is failure, being in error, missing the mark, especially in spear throwing. The root in Hebrew hata originates in archery and literally refers to missing the "gold" at the centre of a target, but hitting the target, i.e. error.

So, when we speak of sin, we speak of missing the mark. The early church writer, Augustine eventually defined sin as a hardened heart and a loss of love for God. Thus, a tendency of the heart to depart from God because of inordinate self-love. Essentially, those things that we do that separate us from God, from one another, from our own selves.

Sin is something that we like to avoid, both literally and figuratively. It's not a topic that comes up often in the United Church. Which is weird, because it is a part of all of our statements of faith - The Twenty Articles of Faith, The 1940 Statement of Faith, A New Creed from 1968, and A Song of Fatih from 2007.

I grew up in the United Church, and I remember when we used to have a prayer of confession and assurance of pardon every week. Honestly, as a kid, it was one of the most meaningful pieces of the service for me. Being a kid is hard, learning how to navigate the world, and having the space to sit with my mistakes but also to know that they aren't what defines me. Most of that is still true now. Learning to navigate the world is a work in progress, we are all works in progress. We make mistakes. It can be helpful to sit with them, reflect on them, learn from them, but also know that they are not the only thing that defines us.

This is what we find with Psalm 32. It tells us what we already know, that to let go of what is weighing us down is liberating. There is joy and freedom in forgiveness. To seek forgiveness requires us to own our sin. To acknowledge the mistakes that we have made, the situation where what we have said or not said, done or not done has missed the mark, and therefore separates us from those around us, or from God.

To think about those things, to acknowledge them, it doesn't feel good. For a lot of reasons, we don't like talk about how or when we've screwed up. To do that requires humility and vulnerability. In our society, too often those are equated with weakness, when the opposite it true. To be open and authentic, even about our mistakes, needs strength. And faith - the knowledge that we are not the sum of our mistakes. God does not keep count. We don't need to hide. As usual, this is counter to the message that we get from the world around us.

What are the instructions if you ever get into a car accident? Move to safe place, get the info of the other driver, call your insurance company. Never admit fault. This sort of thinking has insinuated itself into our whole lives. And it is holding us back.

Our psalm tells us that it doesn't have to be like this. We need not be so stubborn. Yes, looking at ourselves and our shortcomings is uncomfortable. Feeling the pain and guilt of separating ourselves from each other, of harming creation, of dishonouring God, hurts. But if we do not address our pain, our brokenness, our mistakes, we run the risk of carrying them with us - isolating ourselves further, blocking the way to reconciliation.

We are called to more. Knowing that, let us sing:

Refrain: ***Behold, (behold,) Behold, (behold,)***
 I make all things new,
 Beginning with you and starting from today.
 Behold, (behold,) Behold, (behold,)
 I make all things new,
 My promise is true,
 For I am Christ the way.

Part 2

These words that we sing, they echo what Paul tells the Corinthians, tell us in his letter.

Because we claim to follow Christ, we are a new creation. This is more than being reformed or re-educated, it is reconciliation.

It might be helpful to define this term as well. Technically, reconciliation is the end of estrangement; the healing of two parties who come together to find common ground and to move forward on any difficulties they have had. A few years ago, the CBC brought together five young people in Winnipeg to discuss what reconciliation means to them. Their definitions can help our understanding today. They spoke of the responsibility to educate ourselves, and to do the work of standing next to one another to ensure that rights are upheld. Because it addresses sin, reconciliation must be approached with authenticity. It is not hiding our past, because if we do, we're bound to repeat it. It is about restoration, and recovery, and it begins with respect.¹

To be reconciled, in Christ/to God, is to see a whole new world. It's not unlike last week when we talked about repentance as a way of thinking differently. In fact, Dr. Christena Cleveland says that we are called to "cognitive generosity."² What this means is that we must expand what we mean when we say "we." There are times when we just want to be right, or we don't feel like arguing, or it's nice to have our thoughts confirmed - but all of that narrows our worldview, and sometimes our social circles. And if we limit ourselves to those who agree with us, we run the risk of forgetting how to disagree and alienating ourselves from one another. We become more polarized. Separated.

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/what-does-reconciliation-mean-mb-1.3803617>

² <http://www.christenacleveland.com/book>

To be the church we need to leave that separation behind. Paul names us as ministers and ambassadors, entrusted with the message of reconciliation. We need to embrace the newness that our faith offers us. So that we can see differently, looking at the world as God does. With potential and grace.

In his essay for Patheos, Bruce Epperley invites us to be reconciled to God. Accept that you are loved. Let yourself be welcomed home and welcome all those who are lost back into love. We may have to face the physical, spiritual, relational, and legal consequences of our alienating decisions. But, grace abounds and will guide us to a celebration of healing and restoration.³

For that, let us give thanks and sing:

Refrain: ***Behold, (behold,) Behold, (behold,)***
 I make all things new,
 Beginning with you and starting from today.
 Behold, (behold,) Behold, (behold,)
 I make all things new,
 My promise is true,
 For I am Christ the way.

³ <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2019/03/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-fourth-sunday-in-lent-march-31-2019/>