

## A Lamb of God

Preached 1/19/2020 at FCCW

Text John 1:29-42

There's an old Peanuts comic strip where Charlie Brown is leaning on a brick wall with a morose expression on his face. Lucy comes along and says, "Discouraged again, eh, Charlie Brown? You know what your trouble is? The whole trouble with you is that you're **you**!" Charlie Brown looks at her and says, "Well, what in the world can I do about **that**?" Lucy responds, "I don't pretend to be able to give advice ... I merely point out the trouble!"

Like Lucy, John the Baptist didn't claim to have all the answers, but he was pretty good at pointing out the trouble. The trouble, as he saw it, was that people were not living faithfully. They needed to repent and turn their lives around. What he told them, in other words, was similar to what Lucy told poor old Charlie Brown: The whole trouble with you is that you're you!

Some religious leaders came out to visit John by the Jordan River where he was baptizing people. They asked him, "Who *are* you?" The real question that was on their minds though, was "Who do you think you are?" As in, "who gave you the authority to be doing what you're doing?" Especially, who gave you the right to tell *us* that *we* need to repent?!

The answer John gave them was not about who he was, but who he wasn't. "I am not the Messiah." In effect, what he said was that his role was to point out a problem in human nature that needed repair. But as to *fixing* the problem, that was someone else's job.

That's where today's gospel lesson picks up the story. The day after he is visited by the religious authorities, John sees Jesus coming towards him and suddenly he knows that the solution to the problem with those he baptized--and with John himself--the solution to the problem with all of us, was approaching. John says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" John's task had been to prepare the way for the coming Messiah, and he did this by calling on people to repent of their sins. Now the Lamb of God had arrived and John's work was coming to an end. The work of Jesus, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, was about to begin.

Notice that John didn't say Jesus would take away the *sins* of the world, but rather the *sin* of the world. When we say *sins*, we are usually talking about specific behaviors, like lying, stealing, or hurting somebody. The religious authorities were extremely well disciplined about not committing *sins*. So good in fact, that their good behavior sometimes distanced them from their need for forgiveness.

To talk only about sins, but not sin, is like having a cold and believing that the whole problem is a cough or a runny nose and that the remedy is to treat those symptoms; when all the time the real problem that begs for a cure is the virus hidden within our bodies. Pharmacies can sell you medicines to lessen the symptoms of your cold, but medical science has yet to find a cure for the cold itself.

When John said that Jesus would take away the sin of the world, he didn't mean that Jesus would simply teach us how to be more well-behaved toward each other. If anything, Jesus exposed the difference between the symptoms and the underlying disease.

*Sin* describes something deep within us that is like a broken navigational system that points us in opposite directions from what we are meant to travel, so that it becomes easier to do what is wrong, than what is right. Not *committing sins* often actually comes down to wishing to avoid the *consequences* of bad behavior more than *having an inner desire not* to commit the sin. If you don't believe that, just notice the difference in how carefully you obey the speed limit when there is a police cruiser in the rear-view mirror and the free reign you give to your need for speed when you have the road to yourself.

Lucy had it right. The problem with me is deeper than the things I do. The problem with me, is me. And what in the world am I supposed to do about that?! John the Baptist' answer was, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

What did John mean by that? Probably a composite of several things. Lambs were often used as sacrifices in the Temple worship to atone for the sins of the people. Those Temple sacrifices were motivated by the deep human awareness of sin's power to separate us from God, and our need to be reconciled with God. There was the Passover lamb, whose blood saved the Israelites from death and paved the way for their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, which ever served as a reminder that God's mercy sets us free from slavery to sin. The prophet Isaiah foresaw a "Servant of God" who would be led like a lamb to the sacrifice in order to deliver us from the consequences of alienation from God. Christians have always understood these images as foreshadowing how Jesus' death would be the sacrifice which reconciles us with God by removing the barrier of sin.

We are all like John the Baptist, and like Charlie Brown, in the sense of our common need of something to make each of us fully the person God created us to be, but not knowing what in the world we can do about it. Until, we understand that what in the world we can do about it, is to accept what *God has already done about it* through Jesus.

In his Epistle to the Romans, the Apostle Paul laid all the cards on the table when he said: "For there is **no distinction**, since ***all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.***" And he was just as straightforward and in advising us on what in the world we can do about that. Which is that

all of us who fall short of the glorious image of God we were created to be are “now justified by his **grace as a gift**, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **sacrifice of atonement** by his blood”; and that this solution is available to us purely through our faith in its efficacy. In other words, our righteousness is not achieved through our own virtue, but is found in the righteousness of God, who justifies us based on our faith in what Jesus has done on our behalf.

So, we are all like Charlie Brown in that we share with him the same existential problem and the same divine solution. But we are all equally like the religious leaders who confronted John for questioning their righteousness by calling them to repentance along with all the obvious sinners. When it comes to our own need for repentance, we too can fail to see the forest for the trees. Because the landscape of our lives may not be forested with very many obvious outward *sins*, we forget about the presence of *sin* that is within every one of us.

This is particularly true with respect to the sin of racism. White hoods, burning crosses and swastikas are obvious signs of racism. These clearly identify a person as racist. There is a difference though between racist and racism that corresponds to the difference between symptoms and disease. The difference between *sins* and *sin*.

A *racist* is someone who commits observable sins of bigotry. *Racism* is a set of often subtle-to-the-point-of-invisibility assumptions about other people; a judgment—in the words of Martin Luther King—based not on the content of their character, but on the color of their skin.

Racism is a virus that we can carry around within us unconsciously and without ever manifesting in hateful words or actions. Just this week I heard a man telling how when he was younger, he had gotten a job driving a delivery truck for a big corporation. It was not a high-tech occupation. It didn't require much training or special skills. Almost anyone could do it. But he had an edge over other potential applicants. For one thing, preference was given to him because his father worked for the company. And, even though the company was located near several minority communities, the employment opportunity was never posted in any of them. The speaker did nothing wrong by being hired. He never harbored any prejudice against anyone. In retrospect though, he now sees that the invisible (to him) bubble of privilege, kept him unaware of the inequities created for others.

Sin, as in the sin of racism, is often cultural before it is ever personal. It is frequently the sin of the world before it becomes the sins of the individual. But it is our responsibility as followers of the Lamb of God, to identify and expose sin, be it in ourselves or in our world.

In the UCC Book of Worship there is an Assurance of Pardon to be offered following a Prayer of Confession that says: “If we say we have no *sin* we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

But if we confess our *sin*, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our *sin* and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” God does this through Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away sin. My sin. Your sin. And the sin of the world.

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