

## **In Sickness and Health: Sin and Forgiveness**

(A sermon for Saxapahaw UMC, 4<sup>th</sup> week of Lent, 2009.)

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Scriptures: Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2: 1-10, John 3:14-21.

All four passages in this week’s lectionary have two things in common: 1) people sin which causes illness; and 2) God offers forgiveness and health. The scriptures make a clear connection between the relationship of sin and illness and what is needed for healing. These statements sound simple. If you sin, you will get sick. If you are sick, ask for forgiveness, and you will be healed. However, like most things in life and faith, the truth is not as simple as it seems. The relationship between sin and sickness and forgiveness and health is much more complicated. Most theologians are reluctant to take on the subject. I was tempted not to touch it. However, we are in the middle of the Lenten season a season of sacrifice and reflection. We are in the middle of a global recession, and we as a congregation are surrounded by the fresh pain of lost loved ones, and we face the uncertain future of others. If ever there was a time for a congregation to grapple with the relationship of sin and sickness and forgiveness and health, now is the time.

God willing, if I do my job right, we will walk away from this struggle with a real sense of joy, hope and assurance that is present in the promise of God’s forgiveness and healing.

Let’s start by defining what sin is. I’ve talked about sin before in this congregation. Some of you may remember the definition I offered the last time. *Sin* is any action, attitude, desire, or lack of action which separates us from God, from our neighbor, and from our true selves. Sins that separate us from God are those things, desires, attitudes, possessions, and people upon which we place a greater importance than God. Sins against our neighbor are those actions, attitudes, or lack of actions which harm our neighbor or harm our relationship with our neighbor. Sins against ourselves are those actions, attitudes or lack of actions which harm ourselves, or which make our spirits inhospitable for Christ’s presence inside us.

The most widely practiced sins have been deemed the “seven deadly sins” by the church. The practice of these sins is so damaging to our perception of what is right and what is wrong, that practicing any one of them can separate us so much from God, from our neighbor or from our true selves, that it becomes difficult for us to allow the saving grace of God to transform our lives. God is always willing to forgive us, but the practice of sin can blind us to the need for forgiveness. The seven deadly sins are: lust (extravagance) gluttony (addiction), greed, sloth (apathy or laziness), wrath (hate), envy, and pride. Some of these sins are sins against our selves; some are sins against others. All are sins against God.

Let me give you some examples. Probably the ones that are easiest to spot in others are *lust*, *gluttony* and *greed*. Most of us have fallen victim to these sins at one point or

another in our lives. Their extremes can be identified as addiction to such things as alcohol, tobacco, drugs, food, power, money, shopping and many other distractions which deaden us to the pain we feel and see in others. All of our addictions make us feel better in the short term, but like any addiction, we can never get enough and we are always looking for our next fix. These three sins can have very costly consequences, not only for us as individual sinners, but also to those around us. If a person is addicted to alcohol and quietly drinks herself to death, the sin is committed against herself and God. If she drinks and drives and kills a child, then the sin is committed against herself, God, the child and the child's family.

*Sloth* is a sin that starts off as distraction or procrastination and leads to apathy and laziness. Sloth causes us to fail to be present to those around us. We get distracted by TV, work, the busyness of life, and we forget to appreciate the many blessings in our lives. When we do not appreciate the blessings in life, we begin to not care what happens to ourselves, our family and friends, and our community. We no longer care, and because we no longer care, we have no motivation to do anything. Our relationships with friends and family wither. We stagnate and fester, and eventually die. Like lust, gluttony and greed, sloth is a sin against our selves, God and our neighbors. For instance, I can get so focused on a TV show that I literally cannot hear, see or notice what is going on around me. I have learned that if I really want to do something, I have to not watch TV, though I've discovered that Youtube can be just as distracting for me. I fail to finish needed tasks and I ignore my family. Rondell has learned to turn off the TV when he wants my attention. My daughter's solution is to hit my leg and scream at me. God has other ways of getting my attention. But because of my distraction, I commit a sin against my family, my self and my God.

Wrath, envy and pride are all related. They deal with our relationships with others, our self-perception and our perceptions of what is due to us. *Wrath, or hate*, is an unjustified or excessive anger that is directed at an object, person, situation, or group. Anger turns to hate when we are unable to forgive the harm others have done to us or that we have done to ourselves. Hate is grounded in revenge, instead of justice. Ultimately, hate becomes a cancer which eats one up and destroys the hater instead of the hated. *Envy* is misdirected desire. It is the desire to have something another owns. It is the desire to tear down another in order to build one self up. It is self-pity and low self-esteem personified. Envy denies the beauty that God created in each of us. *Pride* is best defined as arrogance. The sin of pride places the highest value upon oneself and one's accomplishments. The sin of pride separates an individual from the community and convinces the individual that he does not need others or God. At its extreme, pride denies the very existence of God or allows the individual to claim to be God. The consequences of the sins of wrath, envy and pride are the separation of the individual from the community and the destruction of the self. Wrath, envy and pride become idols that are worshiped instead of worshiping God. We fill the space where God belongs with these sins.

However, sin is not just an individual practice. Communities can commit sin as well. We call the sin of a community, *corporate sin*. Corporate sin is just as destructive, if not more so, as individual sin. All we have to do is look at the financial mess our economy is

in to see the results of corporate sin. Corporate greed, gluttony, and lust lead to the abuse and misuse of the financial system. The consequences of these sins have been the collapse of many businesses and a global financial crisis which we each feel in our daily lives. Though we as individuals may not have committed these corporate sins, our inactions sanctioned the sins, and we are therefore responsible for them. Remember, sin is any action or inaction which separates us from God, from our Community and from our true selves. If you know about a sin, and you do nothing to stop the sin, you are guilty of committing a sin.

So now we have an understanding of what sin is; how then does sickness relate to sin?

Well, that depends upon the sickness. How many of you have had your doctor tell you that if you weigh too much, eat the wrong foods, don't exercise, use tobacco, and drink alcohol excessively, you will increase your chances for heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer and mental illness? If you haven't heard this from your doctor, then either you have been taking good care of yourself, or you haven't seen a doctor in the last ten years.

We know what causes preventable illnesses, yet we choose to not follow doctors' orders to lose the weight, eat the right foods, get more exercise, stop using tobacco and stop abusing alcohol. We do not treat our bodies as the temple of God. We practice the sins of gluttony, lust, greed and sloth on a daily basis, and we suffer the consequences of our sins with poor health. We are greedy in the portion sizes of our food, (Yes, I'd like to biggy size it). We are gluttons for our chemical fixes of tobacco, caffeine, and ice-cream (I'll have a grande mocha latte, please.). We lust after the foods that make us feel good, even though we know they are oh so bad for us, like the death by chocolate dessert. And we are lazy in our lack of exercise while we procrastinate with a variety of creative reasons (the weather is bad, I have a project due, I must focus on this right now.)

With the excess weight and poor health comes wrath, envy and pride. We hate ourselves and do not believe we are worthy of being healthy. We are envious of those who have good health, but we are unwilling to do the things necessary to get healthy. Because of our pride, we do not ask for help. We are sinners. And our sin makes us sick. We need forgiveness in order to heal.

But some sickness is not the result of our own sin. Sometimes sickness is the result of corporate sin or the sin of others. Like the business man who get cancer from a chemical that he was told was safe, even though the company that sold it knew it was not. Or the young man who was hit by a driver high on prescription drugs. Or the young woman who has post traumatic stress disorder after being raped. All of these examples leave us questioning why these people who are ill need forgiveness.

But we have to remember that we are all sinners.

Everyone of us.

We may not need forgiveness of the sins that caused us to be ill, but we do need our sins forgiven. Forgiveness is the first step in developing a healthy relationship with our own selves, with each other and with God. We need God to forgive us so that we have the ability to forgive our own mistakes and the mistakes of others. The act of forgiveness opens the space needed for healing and wholeness. It is impossible to be healed if one is holding onto resentment, hate, anger, envy, addiction, and the many other distractions that keep us from having a healthy whole relationship with God, with others and with our true selves. God offers us forgiveness even though we have done nothing to deserve it. Forgiveness is an act of God's grace and love. "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the Gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and he saved them from their distress; he sent out his word and healed them and delivered them from destruction." (Psalm 107:19-20). Forgiveness is not easy, but it is the necessary first step toward health and wholeness.

The second step toward health and wholeness is to turn away from our sinful ways and take actions toward healing. In our Old Testament lesson, the people who were ill were told to follow a prescription for healing. When bitten by the snakes, they were to "look upon the serpent of Bonze and live" (Numbers 21:9). We are responsible for our health. Our actions matter. We can choose to go home, clean out your pantry and refrigerator and get rid of all of those foods we know are unhealthy. We can stop making excuses for our procrastination and laziness and start exercising. We can surrender our addictions to God and seek God's help and the help of our community to turn away from our addictions. We can take our medications as directed by our doctors, listen to the specialists who are seeking to heal us. We can develop healthy behaviors, pray, move, and grow in Christ. We can know that we are loved and are worthy of being the healthy, happy temples of God.

If you do all of these things will your illnesses go away?

Maybe.

We must all live with the consequences of our actions. God offers healing to all, but sometimes the healing does not come in the fashion we most desire. Sometimes the healing we are offered is the healing of broken relationships. Sometimes the healing offered is the healing of broken spirits. Sometimes we are healed body, mind and soul. Sometimes, the only way to heal the body is in the body's death and the spirit's resurrection with Christ. We are not promised eternal life in this life, but we are promised eternal life in the next one.

I know that this selective healing may not seem fair. Often, the workings of God are beyond our comprehension and understanding. When we see a young child die of a horrible disease, a baby die before it is born, a young man die for no apparent good reason, or a beloved father waste away before our eyes, finding the grace and love of God in those moments is challenging at best. But God is present, and God is offering us forgiveness and healing. He holds us in his arms as we wail away at him, crying out in

our pain asking “Why? Why?” He holds us tight, tells us he loves us and forgives us, and like any good parent says, “Because I said so. I know it doesn’t make sense right now, but when you are older, when you are ready, I will explain it to you. Maybe not in this lifetime, but I promise one day you will understand. For now, trust me, and know that I love you. Oh, and don’t forget to eat your vegetables.”