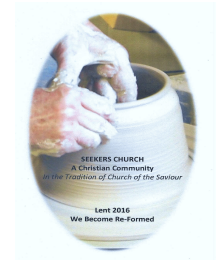


A Sermon for Lent by Margreta Silverstone

March 6, 2016



Fourth Sunday in Lent

In the season of Lent, the scripture passages today allow us to reflect with the early church on the gift that is Jesus among us. The passages allow us to hear a story of a different type of family than the family we may have experienced growing up. The passages connect us to a people who initially did not see themselves as a unified people and had to experience over forty years of traveling together to emerge with some sense of togetherness. And, while not read today, the Psalms also mark our own need.

The text in Joshua identifies a place, Gilgal, that marked both an individual and a corporate place of remembrance and forgiveness. After forty years of wandering, when most of the first generation had already passed away, the Israelites found their way across the Jordan River and could end their nomadic way of life. It is with deliberate humor that the text of Joshua says, The LORD said to Joshua, "Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt." Gilgal was constructed from 12 stones rolled out of the Jordan River. Gilgal was a ceremonial place to mark the end of their journey. It is the place where the Passover was celebrated. It was the last place they received the daily food of manna from God.

It would be very easy for the Israelites to start living in

this new land and forget their past dependence on God. They did not. They used that space as a touch point for corporate action, whether to negotiate peace terms with other nations or to direct their battle plans. Gilgal, rooted in their own dependence on God, was a marker for their future planning. I can respect how a place can be a reminder for individuals and groups. I value ways and places where I can remember my dependence, my need, my sin if you will so that in humility I can commit, recommit and make future plans.

Paul in Corinthians speaks eloquently about reconciliation. Be new. Be reconciled. Share the good news of reconciliation. Share how your sin is gone because Jesus took it over for you. Sin?

A few weeks ago, the Upper Room Devotional provided a reflection from Thomas R. Steagald which seemed relevant to this topic. Steagald, in his book "Shadows, Darkness and Dawn" stated,

I WONDER: Can it be that many Christians have lost the freedom that comes with grace because we have lost the ability to acknowledge our sins and therefore cannot really experience or express our forgiveness? ... We are no longer certain of how to converse about the brokenness that affects us one and all. While many maintain that the last century has been quite arguably the most evil age in human history, even some secular observers have noted that we no longer have a working vocabulary to discuss it. ...

The problem seems especially acute of late, but warnings were sounded generations ago – especially in the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who coined the term "cheap grace":

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle. ... It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth. ... no contrition is required, still less any real desire to be delivered from sin.

In our own time, cheap grace seems to be expressed mainly in terms of “acceptance” and “tolerance.” All are beautiful in their own way; each and every one is fine just the way he or she is. The problem with this kind of language is that it is demonstrably false. People already know, deep down, that they are flawed, that their lives are full of misdeeds and missed opportunities, that they have fallen short not only of the glory of God but also of their own expectation. We experience sin, which is to say we sin and are sinned against – but we have lost a way to talk about it. And if we cannot talk about it, we cannot be freed of the experience or its consequences.

In light of the Corinthians passage, it is really hard to share the good news of reconciliation if I cannot fathom or live into my need, my sin.

I am often like the elder son in the parable that Jesus shared. I am often like the Pharisees in perceiving the problems of the tax collectors and sinners but not my own. I easily deceive myself into thinking that I am not so bad. The problem with that perception is then I miss the power and joy and gift of God’s love and grace. Just like the elder son, I miss that God’s riches are all around me and NOT in short supply. I resent the younger brother’s choices. I cannot share the gratefulness and relief in his return.

If I don’t think I am dirty, I value a bath less. If I am not hungry or thirsty, I eat and drink for pleasure and gluttony, not need. If I dare to believe that I am whole as I am, I do not value God’s forgiveness and love.

Sin. Such an old concept, such an old term. And, yes, not something that I hear much of in the current news cycles or in the cafes and shopping centers and on public transit. How can we define it now? What is sin?

Quinn Caldwell, in the Daily Devotional from the UCC said, “At root, sin is about spending our lives on things that are not

worth spending our lives on. Spend enough of your life on the wrongs things, and it can start to seem like you owe your life to them.”

I have spent too much time on advancing my career. It has taken a corporation misrepresenting me and my work and breaking my credibility to have me see how far I had sinned. I have spent too much time on online games, forfeiting time creating connection with Oslin and my family. I spend too much time festering on perceived criticisms. I hold resentment quietly at the moments when others have not behaved the way I expected. I stay stuck on the negative. I dismiss and ignore and brush off compliments and achievements to celebrate. I have sinned.

I am not sure that talking about sin is going to win me any brownie points with the Outreach Ministry Group. Some months ago, as I observed that this Takoma neighborhood was changing, I had posed the question about whether there was something new Seekers wanted to say. I am grateful for the conversations that have been occurring, reflecting on our individual experience of finding Seekers and making it our place of faith journey. I am grateful for the ways the group has attempted to look at our corporate practices and how those practices help or hinder new seekers finding their place to journey with us. Various members of the group have identify what it is that they value about Seekers, who they think about as groups of people who could be attracted to Seekers, and what sort of message to use to entice people to check us out.

Sin has not been something the group has coalesced around.

Some of the language that my companions have proposed for the outreach materials has been focused on “spirituality” or meditation without an explicit reference to Jesus or the Holy One. There is also a reluctance to use the term “church”. With all of this discussion on general spirituality, I have quietly worried whether there remains a place for me. Well, OK, I

teased in the group that I wondered if there was still a place for David Lloyd, as he has often held the rich lantern of Biblical faith. In reality, the fear is about my own sense of being welcomed. I name my fear that God's riches, as offered through the Seekers faith community, are in limited supply and may run out. I know this is my own sin and I have to be reminded weekly of God's overflowing love and grace.

What attracts me to Seekers and keeps me grounded here? I value moments when I can hear the echo of a corporate recognition of sin and our need for forgiveness. I cannot help but hear in the echo of "Thank God we are in this together," recognition, like in the text of Joshua, of how God has carried us through and forgiven us. That little phrase, which pops up in conversation, is like Gilgal, a marker of God's provision – God's grace – for us.

I value the time when "Cheap Grace" was a clown in a church service that playfully invited me to reflect on how I undervalue my relationship to church and to God. I value Seekers worship experience, with the open pulpit, that changes and is constant, that challenges and reassures.

I value when I can find comfort in remembering that I am not my own, but belong as a new creation to my faithful teacher and Savior, Jesus. I value when I can remind myself that what I do want to spend time on is that while knowing the depths that even I can chase, yet I am reconciled and made whole so that I can live with deep thanks each day.

And I value that this table has room to spare and bounty to spare. God's love and forgiveness is not in short supply.