

There is sin in it...

Matthew 9: 9-13

[Augsburg College Chapel, 9 October 2013]

Last week, I was in Chicago at the Lutheran church offices for a meeting about theological education. In our conversations, one of my colleagues suggested that we needed to consider what it was about our Lutheran faith that brought distinction and focus to our understanding of theological education. And then he went on to say that one such distinction might be our belief that there is “always sin in it...,” there is always sin in it.

Now, I suppose you could conclude that this is some sort of Lutheran slogan, inside baseball even, shorthand for our Northern European ancestral bias toward the dark side of human experience, but then my colleague went on to add – “because there is always sin in it, there is always as well God in it, offering us a way forward, a word of grace and reconciliation, the good news that we are loved and forgiven.” And that, I would offer, is a fitting summary of our Lutheran faith: There *is* sin in it, in every part of our lives, and that is why our loving God sent God’s only son into the world to reconcile us to God, our neighbors and ourselves. Good news, indeed.

Our gospel reading for this morning reads like a script for this dramatic claim about sin and redemption. Jesus, early in his public ministry, is out recruiting disciples. And here sits Matthew, the tax collector, and then there is the meal together with an even wider assortment of those labeled as sinners. And there is Jesus in their midst, claiming in response to the Pharisaic self-righteousness, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

There are three critical theological ideas in that last sentence – enough for another couple of sermons! The first is Jesus’s reminder that he has “come” for this. God has sent Jesus for this reason, that God’s love for God’s people might be known and experienced. The second idea is that Jesus “calls” his disciples to this same work, not to a withdrawal from the world, but rather to be disciples in and for the world. And third, that the call comes not because we are blameless or pure or righteous, but precisely because we are human, sinful and fallen.

This is the remarkable word of grace and reconciliation that is at the heart of our faith. I’m drawn again and again to Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler’s thought that the entire Christian faith can be summed up in the liturgical formula, “Almighty God, from whom no secrets are hid.” This is a prayer of confession that reminds us, challenges us and comforts us with the good news that we are known – fully and genuinely known, like it or not – by the One who loves us, and once we accept that gift of faith, we will find the remarkable centering power of lifting up our sins, our lack of knowledge, our

pride, and letting the gift of forgiveness and reconciliation free us to be loved, to keep on learning, to serve others who also need the embrace of forgiveness. We are called by our God in Jesus Christ to follow, not because we are righteous, but because we are sinners all, sinners who are forgiven and reconciled so that God's good work in the world might be accomplished in and through us.

There is sin in it, no doubt about it, but that sin does not define God's people, redeemed, called and equipped for the work of hope and reconciliation. In fact, our Lutheran faith demands that we face the reality of a sinful world with clear-eyed focus. We recognize the messiness, the complexity, the self-interest and greed, the violence and deception. We ask tough questions and call into question the ways of the world. And then we get to work with a sense of hope and promise, believing that we are called to live as those reconciled and redeemed, offering that same wellspring of hope and reconciliation to all.

And that brings it back to us – each of us who believe in this God of reconciliation – and to our work in the world. It is easy to fall into the traps the world sets for us. Because there is sin in all aspects of our lives together, we are sometimes tempted to believe there is nothing we can do. We might be overwhelmed or depressed by the ways human beings treat each other and not sure why or how we can respond. Or maybe we are like the Pharisees of Biblical times, wondering what we have to do with all this sin when we are the righteous ones and we don't want to be tainted by sin and sinners.

But once again our Gospel offers a simple message about what we are called to be and do – and it is summed up in the call to fellowship, the simple act of sitting at table with all God's sinful creatures, sharing the word of reconciliation, of love and compassion, of forgiveness, of hope for a new way forward together.

What would it look like to follow this faithful call to be wellsprings of reconciliation and hope as we face the pressing ways in which "sin is in it" in our lives today? Perhaps it looks like this...

Here on campus, it's the work we are called to do with our sisters and brothers to face the realities of environmental sins by advocating for solar panels and composting. And it's the efforts to know that some among us go hungry – often invisibly – and we must stock a food shelf to meet their needs. And it's our vigilance in facing the sin of bias and discrimination and working like hell to ensure that we are reconciled with each other – that we love each other – despite our different ethnic, religious, socio-economic, gender and sexual identities.

In our neighborhood, it's the work we are called to do in naming and addressing the sin of targeting our Somali neighbors as terrorists whenever one of their country men does something amiss. And it's the work of recognizing health and educational disparities that keep good people from living to their full potential, and putting in place tutoring

programs and health clinics that reach into the lives of our neighbors and help them help themselves. And it's all we do to ensure that the sins of violence are addressed with both policies and practices that build a neighborhood safe for all.

And in our world, it's the work we are called to do to name the sins of systematic racism and economic injustice that keep people oppressed and hungry, and to become truth tellers to those who propagate falsehoods. It's the effort to address incivility and polarization by showing that reconciled people find common purpose that crosses over political and ideological boundaries and serves God's purposes in the world. It's the work of building what Martin Luther King Jr. called a "world house" – a commitment to fellowship and being at table with each other even when all we see is "the sin in it" and sinners all around – sinners just like us.

The great prophet of 20th century Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote in his *The Irony of American History* (1952) this passage that summarizes how we might live in the world as sinners already saved and called to do God's work of reconciliation: *"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we are saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we are saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own; therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness."*

There *is* sin in it – and precisely for that reason, we believe that God is in it all – the God of hope and faith and love and forgiveness. What good and grace-filled news! Thanks be to God. Amen.