

## Righting Wrongs

I John 3:1-7

April 26, 2009

“But friends, that’s exactly who we are: children of God. And that’s only the beginning.”<sup>1</sup> That’s how Eugene Peterson translates the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse of our I John text in his The Message. We are children of God – we are born of God. The verses that follow those designated for today note: “Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God. The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.”<sup>2</sup>

“We can’t sin?” – what in the world is the author of I John trying to say to us? Earlier in his work he even noted that we sin – so, what does he mean with these words? One explanation offered by Bible scholars is that we can’t sin continually or that we don’t choose to commit sinful acts. I wonder if there’s not an element of once we recognize our relationship with God – once we acknowledge this relationship with God through Jesus Christ – we become aware more profoundly that we have thoughts – we do things – that separate us from the God who loves us and wants us to be righteous – good – holy – and so we try harder not to do or think things that we know to be wrong. There’s a lack of intentionality when we do wrong.

In John Wesley’s sermon “The Great Privilege of Those That Are Born of God” he teaches that when we experience this new relationship with God we begin to undergo inward changes which cause our attitude – our perception – our desires – to be different. One of the commentators in a new packaging of the scriptures – The Wesley Study Bible – summarizes Wesley’s words in that sermon in this way: “Before new birth we do not possess spiritual senses, and we live as though under a thick veil that separates us from God. In this state we have no means to hear God’s voice or follow it, which results in our committing sins. In new birth the “‘eyes of (our) understanding’ are now opened, and (we) ‘seeth him that is invisible’” (~I.9). We become able to receive the divine seed of the Spirit that God continually breathes into us and to respond to God through faith in love and prayer. Hence, we become able to hear God’s voice, obey God, and thus refrain from sin.”<sup>3</sup>

I think I understand what the author is trying to say. But, it seems like a pretty big jump to claim we are no longer capable of sin? That we no longer do wrongful things or think inappropriate thoughts? It seems to me that what happens is that we become more painfully aware of the fact that we do things or think things that we know are not appreciated/acceptable to our Creator or Redeemer. I think what happens is that we become aware in an amazingly freeing way that we can’t do it alone - that we really can’t do good – be holy – be righteous – on our own.

What identifies this new relationship with God – what makes us ready to really change, is this realization that we can’t measure up without some help – some intervention from beyond ourselves. Repentance has to do with facing the reality that I don’t have the power to live the kind of life God calls me to live on my own. My willpower is not the solution to keeping me from sinning. Repentance involves going deeper than simply saying “I’m sorry,” or, “I’ll try harder not to do that again,” or, “I promise to do better.” Repentance is our acknowledging that we are powerless on our own to make our lives better. The AA movement insists that the first step one must take if they wish to overcome the control alcohol has over their life is to admit-confess that they have no power to resist alcohol and they are unable to manage their life on their own. Repentance is

admitting/confessing that we don't have enough power to overcome / resist sin in our lives and thus our lives are unmanageable.<sup>4</sup>

Now, another necessary thing for us to resolve in order to fully grasp what the author of I John is trying to say to us is what sin is. Let's start by facing that the definition of sin he has in mind has to do with a whole lot more than successfully navigating our way around a bunch of dos and don'ts. Sin has to do with more in life than not breaking any rules. The fact that we've never murdered anyone or stole anything or committed adultery or coveted something of our neighbors doesn't mean we are without sin.<sup>5</sup>

When interpreting the fall of Adam and Eve theologian Paul Tillich defined it as the "sense of alienation." It's becoming aware that there is a gulf between us and the Creator. It's a sensing that something's lost in our lives – something's out of balance – that everything is not perfect around us, between us and God, between us and others, inside us.<sup>6</sup>

There's a scene in the movie Grand Canyon where an immigration attorney attempts to avoid a freeway traffic jam. He exits and finds himself travelling through a rather tough part of town. And then, his car breaks down and a gang of young people surround his car as he uses his cell phone to call a tow truck. The gang starts doing some trash talking and vandalizing the man's car. They continue when the tow truck driver arrives and protest when he starts to hook up the man's car. Finally, the tow truck driver takes aside the gang leader and says, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you rippin' him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here."<sup>7</sup>

Sin is felt – is experienced as that feeling/that awareness that something's not quite right. "Sin becomes all those things that we do that we know are not what they should be. Vows should be kept. Marriages should last. Friends don't betray friends. Families ought to be able to talk to each other. Homes should be a place of safety and comfort for children. Sin is whatever causes us to fail to live up to the way it should be. Sin is the missing of the mark. Jesus Christ is the standard and where we fail to live up to that standard of faith and obedience we are participating in sin."<sup>8</sup>

Now, I've said all of that because I'm bothered by where a first literal reading of this passage can leave us – that we don't have to do anything about the wrongs we commit because our relationship with Jesus will absolve us of all responsibility – that we are free from guilt, free from being penalized – because Jesus paid for our mess-ups, our sinning, our wrongdoing on the cross. Therefore, we can sin without remorse – without any need to do something about that which we know separates us from God – that which we know God would rather we do or be – because Jesus paid it all on our behalf.

I've got news for you – I don't think that's the way we're supposed to think or behave. Yes, we are sinners – yes, we can't ever be good enough to earn God's love by simply willing it, on our own. Yes, we are redeemed - we are saved - because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But, that doesn't mean we don't have some responsibility for righting wrongdoing in this world and in our own lives. Now, hear me carefully: it's not that we should attempt to right wrongs in order to be loved by God; but rather, the purpose of our trying to right wrongs is to show how much we appreciate the fact that we are loved by God despite the fact that we mess up. Our righting wrongdoing is an act of thanksgiving for God's grace in our lives. No, we can't make it right on our own. No, we can't become perfect, without sin, on our own – simply by willing to live our lives better,

different. Yes, Jesus does make us worthy – acts through us – is the expiation for our sin and thus the penalty for our sin is paid, but this truth ought to unleash within us an overwhelming desire to bring wholeness to others – to our world – in thanksgiving for the grace we’ve been provided.

Righting wrongs isn’t easy work. John Sumwalt tells of finally facing the pain at the age of 42 of being sexually abused by some clergy when he was an adolescent. He said that it was a long road to recovery. He said that one of the things he finally had to do was share it with his wife whom he’d promised never to keep a secret from but with whom he’d never shared some of the things about the abuse. He said it was tough, but that afterward he felt as if a tremendous weight had been lifted from him. He was relieved physically, psychologically, and spiritually. He told of the two of them holding one another and weeping. The next morning he wrote in his journal: “I am reborn!” He felt alive in a way he hadn’t in a long time.

And then, a few nights later he had a dream that energized his recovery even more. Four days later though he fell again into a deep depression and realized that his recovery work had only just begun.

He ended his reflection with: “I am in a good place these days. The post-traumatic episodes I suffered for over ten years are now very rare. The nightmares I had of my abusers (yes, there were two) have abated. I still see them in my dreams occasionally, but there is no more terror – they are just present. I am also at a point of full forgiveness. I can pray for them and empathize with the pain in their lives that led them to sexually assault me and others. I do not, of course, excuse their behavior. I held them publicly accountable in the church and the community. And I have moved on. I made a very conscious decision not to assume a victim-survivor identity. I have too many other things to do with my life.”<sup>9</sup>

Righting wrongs sometimes involves naming the wrongdoing – claiming or admitting its horror in our lives – allowing the truth about it to be seen by ourselves and by others. It takes admitting that we are in pain and talking about it enough with those who understand and who know how to help us get on the other side of it.

Sometimes though – righting wrongdoing involves our identifying with those who’ve been wronged – our doing something on behalf of those who’ve been wronged even though we may be seen by the recipient of the wrongdoing as part of the group that did the wrongdoing. Today is Native American Awareness Sunday. As I prepared for this morning I couldn’t stop thinking about the relevance of the reality of this people and us who want to deny our role in their terrible treatment by claiming it was a former generation of us who did the deed or deeds.

I don’t know about you, but I find our nation’s history so shameful when it comes to our Native American brothers and sisters that I can’t help but feel some guilt by association. One of the reasons I am pleased we are going to the Crow Creek Reservation this summer is because I find it another chance to be part of the attempt to say to this people, not just that we are sorry – that we aren’t going to allow it to happen again - but that we want to right the wrongdoing of our history by treating you differently in person – we want you to know some white people who care and want to show you our repentant spirit by living among you different than what you’ve experienced or heard.

I really like the attitude and philosophy of the United Methodist supported organization we are going to be working with. Tree of Life is not a church – rather it supports the local congregations of the Crow Creek and Rose Bud Reservations. They are committed to following the Sioux culture recognizing that there may never be a Lakota/Dakota church that follows the European pattern of government and ritual of conventional churches.

They see their task as one of presenting through conversation, the essence of the message of Jesus, and through our labor to show the love and compassion that He showed.

They note that a common feeling among the Sioux has been voiced as, “The whites always know the right thing to do, especially when telling someone else what to do.” Thus, they are committed and make it a part of the training they provide us that we don’t present ourselves in this manner – that we strive to respect the wisdom, common sense, traditional values and sovereignty of the people we will serve. They offer the services of the volunteer teams with the goal of working beside the Native American tribal leaders, seeking their guidance and accountability. The next generation of tribal leaders has come to see the Christian church in a positive manner wanting to learn from them rather than convert them or make them like us.<sup>10</sup>

Righting wrongs starts by us admitting to ourselves our wrongdoing – asking for God’s forgiveness and then repenting in such a way that it results in an action on our part. The special United Methodist Church offering we receive today is to support Native American ministries - shelters for victims of domestic violence, filling food pantries, starting new churches, educating Native American seminary students. Offerings in this envelope will go to those means. If you want to support the specific mission trip among the people of Crow Creek Reservation, there’s still room for more of you to go on the trip or you may make a donation by noting on the memo line “Adult Mission Trip.”

“But friends, that’s exactly who we are: children of God. And that’s only the beginning.”

Let us pray.

1. Eugene Peterson, The Message (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 1993), p. 504.
2. NRSV: The Wesley Study Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), p. 1522.
3. Ibid.
4. Richard A. Jensen, “Repentance and Forgiveness,” The Crucified Ruler (Lima: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1987), 0-89536-870-6.
5. Rick Brand, “Say What?” Sermons for Sundays: After Pentecost (Last Third): Worthy of God (Lima: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 0788023241e.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. John Sumwalt, “You Have Put Gladness in My Heart,” Storyshare, April 26, 2009.
10. [www.treeofliferelief.org](http://www.treeofliferelief.org) site.