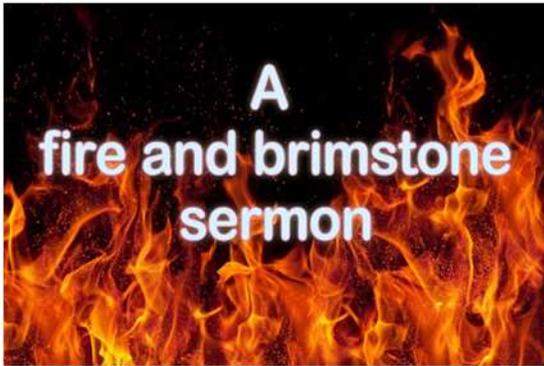


A “Fire-and-Brimstone” sermon

(on Pride Sunday, June 2, 2019. Scripture reading Romans 6:1-14)



At a previous pastoral charge we had a lady join us for a while. She seemed to enjoy worshipping with us, came down for coffee and a chat after the service, and appeared to feel at home in our community of faith. Then one day she called me up because she wanted to talk to me. It was important, she said. So we met in my office for a conversation. I wasn't quite sure what to expect...

She said she enjoyed the being with us, s

he felt comfortable with the people. And then she said, “Now before I decide to become a member of this church I need to be sure of something, because after all, this is about the fate of my eternal soul.” Go ahead, shoot, I said. “Well, she said, do you believe in sin?” Well, yeah. “Then why don't you condemn people who sleep around? Or who drink and swear and smoke? Or who don't believe in God? And I haven't heard you say anything about those gays!” She paused, looked me straight in the eye and said: “Pastor, I don't think you believe in sin!”

Her understanding of sin was limited to things like drinking, smoking, swearing, sex, dancing, not believing in her God, stuff like that. For her, faith was all about “thou shalt not – or else!” I felt so very sorry for her, because she was honestly scared to break the rules and wind up in hell. Needless to say she never came back, but I often think of her.

When people find out I'm a clergy person I generally get two kinds of responses. One, they're quick to point out that they're spiritual – only not religious. They see God in nature, especially sunsets (hardly ever sunrises), or in their garden or their workshop or on the golf course; anywhere but in church.

Or two, they'll let me know how much they dislike being told what to believe by organized religion; they prefer to think for themselves, thank you very much. They assume that church is about checking your brain at the door and to buy into some flat earth belief and fairy tales.

And when I tell them, well, the United Church doesn't really have a specific interpretation of sin, or heaven or hell or death, I get the “Yeah, right!” look. Because everybody knows that churches are in the business of telling people what to think and do, right?

That lady in my office that day wanted me to tell her what to think and do. But the United Church of Canada is not doctrinal. We do not ask people to hold specific common understandings and beliefs in order to come together as a faith community. We don't ask you to sign on the dotted line if you want to be part of the church. In fact, here at St. John's we even *encourage* difference, different perspectives, different gender identities, different Bible interpretations. We feel that we are richer for it.

All we ask is that we orient our lives towards Christ. That we allow God's story shape how we understand the world and how we live our lives, as Jesus taught and lived it. And there isn't one single way to do that; it will be different for everyone, so of course there will be differences.

I think that's why I don't like to talk about "sin" all that much. Not because it can feel uncomfortable or unpleasant, and not because I don't believe in it as the lady accused me of, but because it's not the first thing that defines my faith. When I look to Jesus, I see him doing all kinds of things that were considered "sinful" – breaking the Sabbath rest, touching a bleeding woman, sharing meals with corrupt people, poor people, sick or disgraced people, the list goes on and on. From what I can see, Jesus wasn't all that concerned with what others thought about sin.

But then there's Paul... He manages to cram the word "sin" twelve times into the fourteen verses of this morning's scripture reading. That's a lot of sin! Clearly *he* was concerned about it and he didn't have any problem saying so – over and over. So what gives? And, what is sinning, anyway?

You may remember that John the Baptizer and then Jesus called the people, not to stop sinning, but to repent. There's a big difference. Now I usually don't like to bore you with linguistics if I can help it, but here I think it's important, so bear with me: the original Greek word for "repent" is "metanoia", meaning "change of heart". And "repent(ance)" in turn is based on the Latin word "repentere", which means, "to turn around", or "to turn back".

So in both cases, "to repent" (either in Greek or in Latin) is about changing your ways. It's *not* about guilt or shame or grovelling or beating yourself (or someone else) up as a poor worthless sinner. To repent is about making a change of heart, a decision to *turn around*, to face a new direction – a direction back to God. To repent means to stop missing the mark and to begin to live up to our God-given potential.

That's also where the *covenant* comes in, another thing Paul likes to talk about, the covenant that God made with us at our baptism, the promises God made to us and that we (or our parents for us) made to God. So it's all about relationship, the relationship we have with God and each other and creation. Is your head spinning yet? But seriously, am I making some sense? And can you see how everything fits together?

So, a "*sin*" is anything that breaks down that relationship, that covenant. To sin is to make a choice that harms the life-giving purpose that God has in mind for me, for you, for us as a community, for creation. That's pretty far-reaching! It's also incredibly liberating. Once you realize that "sin" is not about breaking the rules and going to hell, you suddenly see the bigger picture. It's no longer about your personal salvation, and God is no longer the scary boogeyman we have to appease.

On the contrary, God is with us every step of the way, looking out for us, unconditionally loving every single person on this planet. And if that's true – and Paul insists it is – then how can we continue to live in a way that kills people and destroys creation? This earth has been blessed and made holy by God's very presence in it. So

how can we deny anyone when God has chosen to love all beyond our reason and beyond our judgment?

I'm going to take it one step further. If we're serious about following Christ who identified with the people on the margins, the poor, the hungry, the voiceless, the untouchables, the powerless – then how in God's name can we afford *not* to include them among us? It's in their heart-wrenching experiences that we encounter Christ, it's in their unsettling stories that God becomes real.

So when St. John's became affirming twelve years ago, this congregation got to hear some of the experiences and stories of people on the margins – and guess what: you became stronger of it. You grew and matured in your faith, and you developed a deeper understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

But before congratulating ourselves: becoming affirming is only a first step, there's still a long way to go. For starters, why are there no transgendered folks here? Or how would we feel about having a drag queen read the scriptures? What is still missing in the way we read the bible for a two-spirited person to feel at home here? These are questions we haven't even begun to ask.

And why limit ourselves to sexual orientation? Whose other voices are not being heard, and *why* are they not being heard? For instance, what are we missing out on by not having the voices here of folks who are dealing with mental or physical challenges, or chronic pain? How welcoming are we to ex-offenders as they re-enter society? Remember, those are the people Jesus felt comfortable with and whom he called blessed...

The good news is that St. John's is making a real and honest effort at being a truly welcoming, inclusive and affirming place. You have made terrific headway where many others haven't even started yet, and I commend you for it.

The not-so-good-news is that we sometimes think we're already there when we're not, not by a long shot. If the apostle Paul were here today he'd jump up and tell us to get rid of the sin that complacency is. And the apostle John (the one after whom this congregation is called and who's always here) would also jump up and yell, "Repent!" – turn around, stop missing the mark and start living up to your God-given potential!

So on this first Pride Sunday, let us recommit; let's recommit to being a truly affirming community of faith as we did twelve years ago; a community that openly says, "We want to hear those other voices and their stories because other than Jesus nobody else is listening to them. And yeah, it will probably be challenging and people will probably think we're nuts, but we know that we just wouldn't be complete without those voices among us.

Sure, it would be much more convenient to not make that effort, just as it would have been more convenient to not become Affirming all those years ago when it was much riskier to do so than it is now. But you decided to become Affirming anyway, and never regretted it. So keep pushing those boundaries and keep leaning & living into the covenant that God made with us and that we made with God. Don't stop now to rest on your laurels and think we've made it. Because that, my friends, that would be a sin, wouldn't it?

Amen.

Romans 6:1-14

6 Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? ² Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? ³ Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? ⁴ For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.

⁵ Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. ⁶ We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. ⁷ For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. ⁸ And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. ⁹ We are sure of this because Christ was raised from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him.

¹⁰ When he died, he died once to break the power of sin. But now that he lives, he lives for the glory of God. ¹¹ So you also should consider yourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

¹² Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. ¹³ Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. ¹⁴ Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.