

14) Humanity, Part 2

In Part 1 of the theological topic: Humanity, we focussed on our created essence as humans and how that essence as love in relationship can become undermined by fear. In Part 2, we focus in more directly on how fear can become manifest in what has traditionally been called: “The fall.” What has humanity and what do we humans fall into exactly? What did our representative humans – Adam and Eve, fall into? The traditional and biblical answer is: sin.

So, what is sin? One traditional understanding of sin is: “missing the mark.” As humans we fall short of the mark or aim for the wrong mark. But what mark is the right mark? Love is the mark, and love can only be realized and fulfilled in relationship. Sin is missing the mark or aiming for the wrong mark away and against love. We fail love because we are bitter, angry, indifferent or absorbed in our own self-pity, sadness or despair; or we aim for things like money, power, status, or being liked by the right people. There is also jealousy, envy, resentment and hate that can drive us and all of it undermines love and what love requires.

But here are a few more things to think about when it comes to sin.

1) Is there a root sin behind sins? Is there some core reality behind the reality of sin or is sin simply a list of bad behaviours that are destructive of love? There is hate and mistreatment, and the envy or contempt behind such behaviour (active sins), and there is indifference to the needs or plight of others or neglect (passive sins). There is the bad directed at others and the bad that damages oneself. And at the core of all this, many within Christianity have tried to isolate one root sin with a capital S.

a) One popular candidate for such a root Sin has been pride or ego. Pride is arrogance and a belief that I am better, smarter, superior and more worthy than you and this leads to all kinds of mistreatment of you, which also falls on me too. But feminist criticism in theology has identified pride/ego as more a male sin, whereas women have often allowed themselves to be used and abused to serve men’s prideful egos, suffering from a lack of pride or personhood themselves. Women’s core sin historically may be more about a lack of self-esteem or worth, which then becomes an invitation for passive victimhood by the prideful ego of men turned dismissive, abusive and even violent.

b) Still, another candidate for a core Sin behind sins has been what is called: concupiscence. Concupiscence is misdirected desire which turns destructive toward others and oneself. Traditionally, concupiscence has been associated with lust and harmful sexual desire, but the larger meaning has to do with how we humans are tempted and manipulated by our craving for things like money, power, sex or other things that can also become obsessive and addictive, disfiguring and destroying our lives and the lives of others if gone unchecked. While

concupiscence is abusive toward others for one's own gratification, ultimately it is also a turning in on oneself destroying one's essence as created out of love and for love.

c) Finally, though, if there is such a thing as a core Sin, I follow theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who sees behind pride and concupiscence something much deeper: fear (his word is insecurity). Behind every concupiscent passion that is destructive of love there is fear of emptiness seeking to be filled, to matter, to escape. Behind every prideful, egotistical, arrogant behaviour there is a fear of not counting and a desire to prove oneself, to matter, to be the centre of the universe, afraid one is mortal and passing like all else in creation. Behind every form of hate, contempt or judgement there is the fear of the other and the threat they pose because they are different. Fear... Think about how fear undermines love in your life.

2) Still another way of understanding sin comes out of the teaching of St. Augustine, a 4th century theologian of the church. Augustine was influenced deeply by Plato's philosophy and one area was in how to understand sin. Augustine believed that all that God creates has to be good because God is goodness itself with a capital G. Thus all of creation and all that is alive is in essence good. So where does sin and evil come from then? Sin cannot exist in and of itself the way life exists because then God would be credited with creating something evil. No, rather, sin is a "privation" of good. Sin feeds on the good like a parasite, corrupting, undermining and destroying what is good. Here's an example. I can become angry, but the root of anger is a wounded self or outrage at an injustice. I am hurt and my hurt turns to anger. I have to care to become angry. But anger can also become judgemental, destructive, hateful and vengeful, leading to harm. Anger becomes sin. It deprives love which could transfigure anger into constructive advocacy, protest and passion to change what is wrong and make it right because we care. And anger is like many other emotions in us that can either serve love or become sin corrupting the essential goodness in our creation to love as we are loved.

3) Finally, mentioning Augustine also requires we mention a traditional understanding of sin known as "original sin." The idea behind original sin is that somehow there is something in us humans that is always there as a tendency. "Original" conveys a sense of history, namely, how the first humans (Adam and Eve) sinned and have marked all humans after them with the corrupting influence and tendency to sin. But we don't have to think of it historically to recognize sin as a tendency in ourselves. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr puts it paradoxically: Sin is inevitable, though never necessary. In other words, we always have a choice as humans even as sin will always be something we fall into despite our best efforts. Sin is inevitable even as we are responsible for every choice we make.

Now this may sound discouraging and hopeless, even as it may be true. But the beauty of resurrecting love as we have it in the narrative of Easter is that life in Christ is a continual experience of working through sin in our lives, dying to sin and rising up into richer, more steadfast love. Even as fear and our vulnerability cause us to fail and fall when it comes to love

in our lives, we also grow and become strong as we heal and experience the joys of victory in love felt as forgiveness and renewal. Only in eternity, we are told, will we experience complete freedom from having to struggle against sin and being ever vigilant against falling into it. But only here and now do we have the opportunity to experience healing and reconciliation, freedom from destructive compulsions, addictions, and corrosive relationships. We celebrate our victories and our growth in love and we find comfort, understanding and support from other fellow travelers through our struggles. Love is that much more precious and a gift of grace when we know how vulnerable it can be in our world and our lives. What do you think?

In Part 3 we will delve more deeply into what traditionally has been called: The Christian life. How do we grow lives of grace and gratitude, and how do we grow strong in faith, hope and love as followers of Jesus despite how vulnerable we are to sin?