

Leaving the Old Country (for Good)

-It was on the Saturday night before Easter fourteen years ago.

- My older son Caz was a three-and-a-half year old version of himself.
- Tracey was putting him to bed when I heard him say this: ‘Mommy, it’s a good thing Jesus died.’
- I had to peek around the doorway to see where this would go.
- ‘Yes, it is,’ she said. ‘Why do *you* think it’s a good thing?’
- ‘If he hadn’t died, he wouldn’t have taken away our sins,’ said Caz.
- There was a pause. Then, ‘But *Mommy*, what’s a *sin*?’
- Tracey looked over to me, hopefully, offering a prompt: ‘Daddy?’
- But I demurred, lobbing that ball back into her court.
- So Tracey launched into telling Caz how ‘sin’ comes from an archer’s term for missing the mark, for being off-target. How Jesus’ extraordinary life and love gives us the bull’s-eye to shoot for. It’s what we were created for. To love God. To love neighbor. To love ourselves. To love the earth. Sin means we shoot wide of what we’re here for. We miss the mark of what brings God honor and gives us the most life.
- She summed all this up with flourish. And she looked hopefully at Cazden, asking his little face to validate her three years of theological education.
- And Caz responded: ‘Mommy, all this talking is making my bottom itch.’

Now that’s when I finally jumped in. ‘Caz,’ I said, ‘sin is when you do something wrong.’ But here’s the thing. Tracey had it right. Sin is not just doing something *wrong*. Not just offending the moral sensibilities of polite society or your fussy great aunt. It’s more serious than that. Sin is our rebellion against God. Sin is our fundamental preference for false gods. Sin is our turning away from the Way, the Truth, the Life that is most Real and Right and Good. Sin is dishonoring God in thought, word or deed, missing the mark of what it means to be truly human, missing the mark of *Jesus*’ faithfulness.

That’s why Cazden had it right, too! It’s a good thing that Jesus died to take away our Sin. That our rebellious nature does not turn God away. It’s a good thing that God embraces our broken state with unconditional love.

-But here’s the question that comes up. (which Paul addresses in his letter to the Roman Christians.) If our Sin doesn’t turn God away from us, why *not* sin? If his grace is really that big, why not just live it up?

Can’t you just hear a child asking that question?

‘If you’re going to always love and accept me anyway, why *not* rebel?’
As you can imagine, Paul’s answer, like a good parent’s, is that sin injures not just God, but *us*.

-I’m going to be reading from Romans 6.1-14 (from the Message).

As I do, imagine two countries. Divided by the River of Life and Death. One country is ruled by a drug dealer named Sin. Sin is attractive and manipulative. He soothes you with false promises

of freedom. A so-called freedom that shackles you in selfish immaturity. Sin is subtle. He plays the friend. He whispers that what he has to sell will make you strong and secure, desirable and complete. Sin tells you little lies about what matters that make you afraid. Lies that lead to Sin's false ways: narcissism, consumerism and compromise. Sin invites you to live out an addiction to emptiness, to build a house of cards.

The other country is governed by the True Ruler of all, whose name is Grace. And Grace promises you freedom, too. But the freedom promised by Grace is not the so-called freedom to chase after power and pleasure and popularity, to do whatever you want. No the freedom given by Grace calls for allegiance to his Way – for humility, courage, compassion, generosity and self-sacrifice – all on behalf of living for love.

At the first word of your defection from Sin, Grace dives into the River of Death and Life, comes to you where you are in Sin's country, overcomes Sin's enslavement, grasps hold of you, and rescues you from the seduction of wrongdoing. He takes you into the River of Death and Life and pulls you through the water like a lifeguard, throwing you up to safety on the green banks of his own country for a forever new life. Free *from* Sin's dominion. Free *for* honoring the Lord whose name is Grace.

-This from Romans 6:

6 1-3 So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not! If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!

3-5 That's what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country.

6-11 Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life—no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection.... When Jesus died, he took sin down with him.... From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did.

12-14 That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God.

This is the word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.* Let's pray....

Lord God, we pray that by the power of the Holy Spirit you might open this Word to us, that we might once again today be set free from the power of Sin to journey forward in the land of grace and joyful obedience, so that we might be part of the good news in a world that desperately needs good news. Amen.

-Paul articulates a truth that all humans struggle with this side of Christ's kingdom come, whether they know it or not. Some of us living in the land enslaved to Sin, having never experienced the gift of freedom. Others of us having come through the River, still hearing echoes of Sin's tempting voice calling to us, still seeking to manipulate us, to pedal the very drugs of choice we have escaped.

Sometimes I think it's harder to see how our own rebellious nature flirts with Sin than to see it in others. What are the sins you experience in others? Maybe in the news? Maybe in the way others consume the news?

Terry McGonigal has been one of our congregation's teachers from Whitworth U. He teaches the Temptations of Jesus as thematic representations of the ways Sin enslaves us to rebellion against God. The devil is the splitter, who tears us apart from God. He tempts Jesus as he tempts us, with 1. Turning stones into bread: consumerism; feeding my appetite; filling myself with stuff. 2. Jumping from the pinnacle of the Temple: narcissism; fanning my fame; bowing to the applause of others. 3. Taking all kingdoms of world (without suffering way of the cross): compromise; cutting corners, sacrificing integrity and faithfulness for cheap, empty power.

Consumerism. Narcissism. Compromise. (or) Pleasure. Popularity. Power. Which one of these calls to you from the Land of Sin, lulling you to slavery?//

-I think there is something underneath even these desires. And that's Fear. Sin is about fear. The fear of not having enough, of being unfulfilled. The fear of being disregarded. The fear of powerless exploitation by others. That is, the fear of having to suffer. And so we aim to plug the holes in our heart. We feed our longings or numb them. We fan our fame. We cut the corners. We hurt others before they can hurt us. Or we hurt those who have hurt us.

-Some years ago, I listened to a podcast called Invisibilia. It was about fear. One man, named Jason, was divorced. His wife had left him for a taller, more attractive man who made more money. And he began to have panic attacks.

One night, he realized though tears both how afraid he was and what he was afraid of. (And there's a lot to say for this act of courageous reflection – for exploring what you're really afraid of.) What Jason determined was that his real fear was rejection. His selfworth was predicated on what others thought of him. This led him to consider an element of the Russian equivalent of Navy Seal training. Rejection therapy. The aim is to get over the power the approval of others has to destroy you. And so Jason started working to be rejected once a day. He began requesting rides to places that made no sense. He started asking strangers for their email addresses. Etc.

Getting rejected. It turned the old logic on its head. Being rejected, not receiving the applause of others, was his goal. To be rejected made him a success. And Jason described this experiment as the opening to a new world. It was an upside-down reality like standing on your head underwater. But reality all the same. This new way granted him freedom from his fear. From the tyranny of what others thought.

What's more, it turned out to be far harder to be rejected than Jason had thought. He found out that, surprisingly, people often said *Yes*. To sharing meals. To drives. To doing his laundry. To building relationship with a stranger. And here's the insight. It turned out that the *story* he was telling himself about the way the world is and about the power of rejection was, actually, not fully true.

Fear, Jason decided, requires time and energy and thought. It requires developing a story in your head. And in his experiment, the *new* story became that he was free from rejection. This led him to a new freedom: the freedom to experience relationship.

What's the take-home here? Not to become creepy rejection seekers (unless that helps!). But this: *We are free to disobey our fear!*

-Do you hear that in the truth Paul is sharing? That we have been *set* free to disobey our fear? We are too-often living with a false story in our heads. False fears enslave us to Sin. But the TRUE Story is that our sin has been defeated. Our Sin has been overcome. Christ has absorbed the power of Sin and taken it to death in his body on the cross. Christ has been resurrected. And we who will receive the gift are 'in Christ.'

So we have died to Sin. In our baptisms we go under the water to die and rise out of the water to new life. We have been set free to disobey our fear. To reject the voice of Sin. To live in easy relationship with the risen Christ. To listen to the One who speaks our *mother* tongue. To trust in his love to meet our deepest, most human needs.

-The promise of this passage is Exodus. Just as God freed his people from slavery in Egypt, led them through the Red Sea, and guided them on a journey of building trust toward the Promised Land, Christ has set us free from slavery to Sin. We have come through the waters of baptism for this journey from grace to good.

-What about you again? What temptations and habits whisper to you from the other bank of the river?

Maybe: complaining, a critical spirit, bullying, undervaluing your voice, judgmentalism, worry, disrespect, arrogance, greed, unchecked anger, entitlement, violence, lust, distrust, gossip, grudge-holding, ingratitude, pride, self-pity, self-righteousness, despair?

Really, it might be more helpful to think: what is your fear? Is it rejection, grief, missing out, insignificance, obscurity, powerlessness, unpopularity, failure...? And how does your fear lead you to discount the gift of Grace, to dishonor God, to distrust God's goodness, to rebel against the Word and Way of Christ?

Jane Bahls will be ordained to be an elder not today but in a couple weeks. At our incoming officer orientation this week she shared a story about a young woman she mentors who called her to say that she is twenty-six years old, has been a Christian now for some years, but she just keeps struggling with sin.

Jane replied gently, with some humorous version of, 'Really? You're twenty-six and still haven't stopped sinning?' She told her young friend that she'd be under construction for a very long time. Jane said that she herself is more than forty years older and herself still under construction. 'According to Scripture,' she said, 'we have been made holy, we are being made holy, and we shall be made holy when we see Christ face to face. So go easy on yourself. Confess your failings, thank God for the assurance of forgiveness, and remember that you're still under construction.'

Friends, we are not alone in this struggle. The Holy Spirit of God is alive in us, building us up to obey and grow in joyful obedience to Christ.

Tell yourself the True story. Trust it to be true. You have been rescued from the land of Sin for a new Land ruled by Grace. You have died to Sin and been raised to a new life. You have come through the waters of baptism (or you can!). So consider yourself cut off from the old life and set free for the new. Sin now speaks a dead language to you. Do not give Sin a vote in your decisions. Do not go on errands across the river. But stride freely forward, hand in hand with Christ. Go easy on yourself and others as you journey from grace to goodness.

Amen.