

John Sampson

“I Am His”

Text: Romans 7:15 – 24; Song of Solomon 2:8 – 13, 16

Preached at KVCC

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Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer. AMEN.

This morning we opened our worship with a responsive reading from Paul’s letter to the congregation of the followers of Jesus in Rome.

It is Paul’s great confession of the war raging within his own soul. It is a war between his knowledge of what is right, and the irresistible human drive to sin and to do evil.

But we didn’t just hear Paul’s confession from his own lips; we didn’t simply sit and passively hear of the failings of one of our

spiritual ancestors. We participated in his confession. By responsively reading Paul's expression of his own sin, and his own struggle, we gave voice to our own participation in the brokenness of human life.

How did it feel?

How did it feel to read and voice the truth that "sin dwells within me"?

What was it like to reveal before everyone here this morning that you are "wretched," and that you cannot do what is right?

To follow Jesus is a counter cultural commitment. His message asks us to look critically at many of the assumptions and values of our lives and of our society. His ethics asks us to overturn the power

structures of our world - and privilege not the powerful, but the weak, not the rich but the poor, not the famous but the invisible.

Likewise, the experience of admitting here, among our friends and neighbors, that we sin is a counter cultural moment. For when do we ever share with one another that we fail? Isn't our society's conventional definition of personal worth predicated not on being a person who fails, but on being a person who succeeds? Isn't it a scandal to admit we are capable of evil, when evil is connected, in our wider historical narrative, to figures such as Hitler and bin Laden? And yet isn't the confession of Paul, and our individual confessions, connected to a deep truth, the truth of what our tradition calls the fall of humanity?

I don't personally believe that the garden of Eden existed in an objective, historical and empirical way. That's just me. You may believe differently, and that's OK. But what I do believe is that the

story of Eden, and the myth of humanity's fall away from the intimate presence of God, reveals a deep truth. The story of the fall points to the undeniable human experience that we all sin, we all hurt each other, we are all alienated from God, and from relationships based on compassion and truth. In our reading today from Paul's letter to the Romans, in our shared confession, we express the ongoing truth that the story of Eden, and the fall of humanity, is our truth and that it is our story.

It's interesting that Paul never shares with us the specifics of his sin. He never tells us how exactly he lives in opposition to God and to his family and neighbors. It may seem as a convenient omission, as a moment when Paul pulls the punch. But I think his silence as to the particularity of his sin allows the definition of sin to remain open-ended, and allows for an understanding of sin that encompasses the full variability and boundlessness of human failing.

As you read the words from Paul and admitted that you were also a sinner what might you have imagined your failing to be? In Paul's silence of how he fails in his life, what did you project into that dark void? What was the sin you created in your own image? I don't ask you to share it with your neighbor or with your family, but I do ask you to share it with your own heart and with your own consciousness.

In silence look and see where you have hurt someone else.

In the quiet depths of your being look and see where you have forgotten God.

As we consider the ways we have worked against those in our lives, and against God, we can see the effect of sin. Sin is another name for all of the activities we do in our lives that break apart our

relationships, that alienate us from human intimacy, that put a wedge between the Divine and her people.

As Paul elaborates on his confession he never mentions anyone else. He is alone. Like a black hole, he has collapsed in on himself because sin has cut his ties to all of the meaningful relationships in his life. I, I, I that is the only being that sin will allow Paul to recognize. I, I, I is the only being that sin will allow us to see as we are mired down in our own selfishness, and self importance.

At the end of the passage from his letter Paul asks the question that we may be asking ourselves.

“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Who will reach into the grave of isolation and alienation that sin has created for me?

Who will raise me to the possibility of new life, life lived in relationship, life lived in the sunlight of human and Divine love?

Listen, for there is an answer. Listen, it is the voice of a woman who responds. Listen, it is the voice of love that speaks. Listen for the good news.

And let us speak it together. For just as we admitted our sin in community, let us now join in revealing our redemption. Please join me in our responsive reading from The Song of Solomon printed in your bulletin.

One: The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills.

Many: My beloved is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

One: My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;

Many: for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

One: The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.

Many: The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom; they give forth fragrance.

One: Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

Many: My beloved is mine and I am his.



This unnamed female voice has transported us back into the garden. It has opened the gate and we find ourselves returned to our original home, the home that our sin and disobedience drove us from. We wake up and find ourselves in Eden.

We may have moved back to a place from which we came, but we have not moved back in time. The voice we hear speaks from the present, from a reality lived in the Now. We haven't had to travel back in time to experience the flowering blossoms, or the newly set figs, or hear the birds sing. We have only had to open our hearts to love.

Love that spiritual force that binds our hearts to our friends and families.

Love that unbreakable attraction between humanity and God.

Love the antidote to all of the selfishness and alienation that Paul confesses lives inside of him, and to all of the cold aching loneliness that has overtaken our lives.

Love the destroyer of sin.

The Song of Solomon is a love poem shared between a young woman, and her male lover. Unmarried, unengaged these lovers steal away in the night to ravish each other's hearts and bodies. This poem never mentions God, but has traditionally been understood as a metaphor for the relationship between the Mortal and the Immortal, between Christ and his church, and between the soul and God. It is a celebration of the sensuality of human existence, and a joyful embrace of the intimacy we live within the Divine.

When you spoke the words, "the voice of my beloved," who did you imagine? What is the love you pictured?

When you said, “arise...and come away,” where did your heart want to go?

Did you feel a happiness when you read this passage attributed to the deep wisdom of Solomon? That is the feeling of sin fading. That is the experience of the alienation located at the root of the fall of humanity releasing its grip over your life. In this poem we hear the I speak, but its isolation is blistered in the embrace of the Other. We have returned to Eden, and it is the warm breath of our lover, and the sound of God’s heart beating as we fall asleep on her breast.

The sin of Paul, and of all humanity. The redemption of humanity through love. Our lives are lived in a dynamic struggle between these two poles. Both of our readings were written in the present tense because they are both the possibility of our lives. At times one exerts more force and presence, only to be overturned by the other

at a moment's notice. We know our failings, the way we sin against others. We also know the moments of compassion and selflessness that we offer to others in love.

Yes we sin. Yes, we all have things to confess. Yes there is an evil that lives in our hearts that is capable of the darkest expressions. But as followers of Jesus we try to lessen the power of our fall even though we know we will never escape its power fully. And we do this not because it is the right thing to do, although it is. We do it because we have a vision that this is what we were created for. We believe that God formed our species not to wage war, not to live in poverty, not to lord power over each other, but to love one another. We believe that God created us also to live in the radiance of the Holy One, and not simply to live there, but to love there.

Think of the horrifying truth of sin that drives the wars in Syria, and Iraq and Afghanistan. Think of all of the relationships that are

fractured and corroded by the terror that those living in Somalia and Ethiopia experience on a daily basis. Sin is at the base of one of the greatest human migrations in history, a refugee crisis that the world is experiencing right now. But our faith teaches us that destruction and violence and intimidation, that sin, doesn't have the final word. There is another force, which underpins creation and it is the force of love. The force of the work that people like Beatrice are accomplishing to bring people together, to let those who have been silenced speak, and to heal the wounds of those who have experienced unheard of trauma and dehumanization.

Where in your life do you work for love in this world?

Is it within your own family? Within this community?

Or is it farther afield in the problems and challenges of our greater society and world?

Wherever we do the work of love, wherever we follow Jesus and spread a gospel of compassion and justice, we are undoing the power of sin. We are healing where there is brokenness. We are raising new life where relationship and community have suffered and been shattered.

Because we are called to be agents of love, and the people of the Author of love.

AMEN.