

America's original sin

John 15:1-10

May 10, 2009

What do the following things all have in common?

The person who has no use for organized religion, but says he can worship God just as well in his own backyard ...

The rebellious teen who is convinced she has no need for parents ...

Suburban sprawl ...

The decision by officials of the United States government to go to war in Iraq ...

The decision by some churches to leave the United Church of Christ over the issue of same-sex marriage ...

The person who doesn't think he needs to read the instructions ...

Our suspicion of government entitlement programs, and the way we refer to "welfare" as if it were a bad disease ...

Our cultural fear of old age, thinking it a malady to be avoided or postponed by any means possible ...

The person who refuses to seek counseling for help with a relationship that is not working ...

The fact that it is much easier for us to serve God than to love God ...

What do all these things have in common? This, that they are all, in some fashion, manifestations of America's original sin!

"Original sin." Now there's a term you don't hear anymore. "Original sin" is a theological concept. It refers to a sin that is original, not so much in the sense of being the first in a series of sins, but in the sense of being primary -- the source, the origin, from which a host of other sins spring.

"Original sin" describes not just something we do, but something we are, not something incidental, but something constitutional. "Original sin" refers to sin that affects us not just one by one, but affects us as a group, as an entire community, as an entire race.

“Original sin” is a state of being in which we all share, a state of being we inherit from our fathers and mothers and pass on to our children. And the effects of “original sin” extend to all aspects of our lives, coloring all our thoughts and all our judgments and all our desires.

But we don’t hear about “original sin” anymore, even in church. Our Christian thinking and our Christian preaching has become far less theological, which is both a good thing and a bad thing!

It is a good thing because of an increased emphasis on lived faith. We show what we believe by the way we live, not by the way we think.

But it is a bad thing, too, because the purpose of theology -- careful thinking about who God is and careful thinking about the implications of what God does -- the purpose of theology is to help us live well! And muddled thinking leads to muddled living!

How we think about original sin is a case in point. Without the concept of original sin, we will consider incidents of sin to be just that -- incidental ... isolated cases of poor judgment or faulty reasoning or heat of the moment passion or bad upbringing, things that may be corrected with a little hard work and education and self-discipline and maturation.

But when we understand the meaning of original sin, we realize that we are, all of us, infected with a disease, a fatal illness, that must be cured if we are to live, really live, at all. So what is that disease? What does theology teach us about the original sin of the human race? Well, we’ll talk about that some other time! Today I want to talk about the “original sin” of our particular culture, America’s original sin.

Jim Wallis, author and activist and founder of the Sojourners Community in Washington D.C. -- and many others, including President Obama -- have referred to racism as America’s original sin. And the label fits ...

From the beginning, racism has been an affliction that has plagued our life and our history as a nation, a demon we have not been able to exorcise. Our founding fathers and mothers were not able to come to agreement on the issue of slavery in the new republic, but, instead, crafted a series of compromises that allowed its continued existence, and birthed a nation dedicated to life, liberty, and happiness ... for some.

Racism, and the implicit tolerance of racism, has haunted us throughout our history to this day, overshadowing and complicating our struggles with a host of political and social issues. Think of the marks left on our collective soul by

our treatment of African Americans and native Americans and Japanese Americans. Think of the volatile racial component in our quarrels over issues of criminal justice and economic opportunity and access to education and immigration policy.

Racism is an “original sin,” not just the sin of a few misinformed and misguided individuals, but a mind set passed down from generation to generation; not just the unfortunate attitude of a few “rotten apples,” but a constitutional disease infecting all of us, dividing us against ourselves.

It is a disease of which we must be cured if we ever hope to make the American dream the dream of all and not just a few. It is a sin we must acknowledge, each of us and all of us, a sin we must confess and from which we must humbly turn if we want to be the land of freedom and opportunity and justice we claim to be.

But racism is not the sin I want to speak of today. I want to speak of another “original sin,” the effects of which are no more or less destructive, but a sin that may be in fact more potent and more deadly because we do not even recognize it as sin. We may deny the racism that exists within our communities or within our own souls, but few of us would commend it. But the sin I want to speak of today is something of which we are quite proud!

The sin I name as America’s original sin is our declaration of independence.

Now, before you get too excited, let me be clear: I’m not talking about the document! I’m not talking about the document, but about the attitude, the attitude that is hard-wired into our American psyche, making a supreme value of independence and self-reliance and a can-do mentality, as in “I can do it myself!”

Our cultural heroes are the self-made men, the successful women, people who made it to the top “all on their own.” We prize our independence and we fear dependence on others. We want to be self-sufficient and we hate having to rely on anybody else. We admire people who are ready and willing to make the tough decisions and to take decisive action all on their own. In our culture, asking for help is a sign of weakness. Needing help is a reason for shame.

I don't need to go to church. I pray to God in my own way. I meet God in the garden or on the mountain or by the lake ... I can do it myself! I don't need to be with other people!

I don't need parents. They don't know anything about my life or about the way things are for me. I'm not a baby ... I can do it myself! I don't need anybody!

I need my space. I need room to spread out. I need room to store all my stuff ... I don't want to share! I want what's mine!

We need to take action. We need to act first, to launch a preemptive strike. We need to do it to protect our own interests. If other nations want to help, fine, but we are going to do it anyway ... We can do it ourselves! We don't need anybody else!

That's the last straw. We're leaving this church. We're not going to put up with this nonsense, with their betrayal of God's holy law ... We know better! We will be better off on our own! We don't need them!

The Bible? I don't need it. It's from a different time and a different world. And I don't need somebody else to tell me how to live my life anyway ... I can do it myself!

Why should we help them if they aren't ready to help themselves? Nobody helped me get to where I am today ... They should do it on their own. It's the American way!

Growing old is a fate -- worse than death. I can't stand the idea of depending on somebody else to feed me and dress me and help me to the bathroom ... If I can't do it myself, I don't want to do it. I'd rather die, and if they let me choose to die, if they let me cause my own death, I'll do it!

I'm not going to talk to a counselor. What does she know about my life? It's my life, mine to sink or swim. If I can't fix it, it can't be fixed ... I can do it myself! I don't need you!

What can I do for you, God? Do you see all the things I have done for you already. But I'm ready to do more. I can make you proud of me. I can show you I am a good person ... I can do it -- myself! I don't need -- anybody else! I don't need -- you?

Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you ... A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine ... You can do nothing without me.

You can do nothing without me. This is the reality. This is the truth. This is the only cure for our original sin: Jesus. Uniting ourselves to Jesus, remaining in Jesus, sinking our roots deep in Jesus, building our lives on Jesus. We need him. And we need each other. We cannot do it on our own.

We are not independent. We are dependent. Without help, we fail. Without love, we wither. Without grace, we die.

Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. It's not just a matter of listening to Jesus, following Jesus, imitating Jesus ... from a distance, on our own, by our own strength. It's a matter of being joined to Jesus.

And what does that look like?

It looks like obedience: not what I want, but what you want. Your will be done!

It looks like humility: knowing and saying and living like we need somebody! Like we need him! Making time to be with Jesus. Like we need each other! Making time to be with the body of Christ, Jesus' people, the church.

It looks like desire: wanting to hear him, wanting to feel his touch, wanting to feel the touch of his grace. Wanting to tell him of our love and offer him our praise. Wanting to show him our love and live out our praise. Wanting just to be, to be quiet, to rest, with him, where we are, wherever we are, because he is there, too.

Can America's original sin be cured? Can the sin that lies deep in your soul leaving you restless and disconnected and always unsatisfied and ultimately alone be cured? I can tell you where to look for an answer ...