

Sin and Salvation

I suppose I should make my confession right off the bat. During our Sunday morning confession periods, I often can't find much to confess. I sit there in silence, eyes closed, knowing that this is supposed to be the time for self-examination, for recognition of my sins of the week and contrition for them. But, often, nothing of much importance occurs to me. Oh, it's not that I can't find *anything*. I long ago lost the illusion that I was better than most other people ... (so any of you who were thinking you might suggest a few areas for my examen don't need to be too eager). It's more that the sins I become aware of seem to have had relatively little to do with what really kept me separated from God during the past week.

My self-absorption and anxiety, for example, are certainly the cause of much separation from God and much behavior towards others that I wish were different, but I've struggled with those character defects for years, and—despite my desire—they don't seem to change much. I'm not sure how much capacity I have to change them. Confessing—in the sense of apologizing to God—seems less appropriate than weeping out of sadness for my brokenness or pleading for help from a merciful God.

To take another example, the Damascus Road Anti-Racism training that several of us have undergone in the past weeks understands racism as so deeply ingrained in our culture, that it's not possible to escape its influence. I've recognized what the anti-racist trainers call my "internalized white supremacy," and I know how much damage it does to myself, my family, and to others, but—while I certainly have some power in the matter that I should take responsibility for—those racist attitudes and beliefs have been instilled in me over a lifetime of living in the culture. When I start accusing myself after yet another manifestation of my racism, I try repeat to myself, "Of course I'm racist: I'm a sixty-year-old white male born and educated in the United States. What do you expect?" Sure, I feel a responsibility to become more aware of my internalized attitudes and try to do something about them, but again it doesn't seem to make as much sense to "confess" them as to cry for release from captivity.

So ... while I don't want to exaggerate, I do find our corporate confession on Sunday mornings emotionally confusing. I scramble about—sometimes a bit desperately—searching for something to confess. I feel alternately blind for not being able to see my sinfulness and then guilty for my blindness and then I start wondering where I'm going. Understandably, the Absolution isn't very comforting, either.

So, Marcus Borg's chapter on "Sin and Salvation" in *The Heart of Christianity* came as a ray of fresh sunshine parting the clouds. In that chapter, many of you will remember, Borg asks whether " *sin*' is the best way to name what is wrong [with us] and why we are lost."

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He writes, "If to say, 'We're all sinners, we're all sinful, ' is our way of saying, 'Something is not right, something is radically wrong, we are lost,' [then] I agree. ... [But is *sin*] the most helpful way of naming what is wrong"? And is forgiveness the best description of what might heal us?

Borg, of course, doesn't deny the reality or importance of sin in human fallenness. He doesn't dispute that sin is a primary image within the Bible for what plagues humanity, but, he says, there are other important images of our fallenness as well and each of them requires a kind of healing *different* from forgiveness:

- If our problem is blindness ... then we need sight.
- If our problem is exile ... then we need to return.
- If our problem is bondage ... then we need liberation.
- If our problem is closed hearts ... then we need to have them opened.
- If our problems are hunger and thirst ... then we need food and drink.
- If our problem is being lost ... then we need to be found, and so on.

For many years, during the worst of my depression, I felt estranged, alone, cut off, sometimes almost inhuman. I'm sure there was sin mixed in there as well (pride, disobedience, unfaithfulness to God, and so on), but what I think I really needed was not so much confession as to acknowledge (and have others acknowledge with me) human frailty and fallenness. I didn't need so much forgiveness as healing for the mental illness, or, failing that, some comfort for the utter separation I sometimes felt. I was a member of Potter's House at that point, and I remember sometimes having to leave the church service in the middle ... because just being there made the feelings of depression unbearable. (I never did understand exactly why that happened there in the service. It may have had something to do with the contrast between the joy and salvation expressed in what we were saying and the way I felt. To a much less degree I still experience it sometimes here at Eighth Day.) But I do know that to sit there during the confession, trying to come up with something for which to ask forgiveness was painful. Not because I couldn't find *anything*, but because *everything* about myself seemed in need of healing. All I could think of was to ask forgiveness for being David Hilfiker. I seemed to have little power to change.

As Borg implies, of course, I could always find some element of sinfulness in the way I was feeling. Maybe I *could try* harder. Maybe I *should* just “act as if” I were feeling some other way, and it would have changed. Maybe it w
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my pride that kept me from just saying “Fine” when someone asked me how I was. So often it did seem I should just be able to will myself out of the depression and when I didn’t do that, I sometimes accused myself of just wanting to wallow in my illness. There was no end to the mind games I could play with myself, and they often seemed to end in sinfulness. And sometimes, of course, sinfulness was exactly what it was, and I needed to confess it and be forgiven. But much of the time the brokenness I was experiencing wasn’t sinfulness, and I found confusing the idea that I needed to cram it into that category during worship. “I don’t *want* to be like this; I’m not *choosing* to be like this; and *repenting* for being this way doesn’t make much sense. I feel guilty enough for who I am.”

What helped me so much in reading Borg’s chapter was not only his confirmation of the way I’d been feeling about confession but also his assertion that there was a richer, Biblical way of thinking about what was wrong, a better Biblical image for my sense of separation from God. Sin wasn’t the only possibility. Especially during those times when I was mostly depressed, for instance, the helpful images would have been bondage or even exile, and the healing to ask for would have been liberation or return to community.

Borg also points out that the Christian emphasis on sin has usually been interpreted as individual sin, which has allowed us to neglect the social (or structural) aspect of sin that was so important for Jesus. In this community, of course, we *do* speak about social sin, but even here there’s sometimes the tendency to respond to the social sin we participate in by repenting and asking for forgiveness. And while that may sometimes be appropriate, at other times it leads to a misunderstanding of the problem and a muddled response.

What, for instance, is the appropriate response to the US militarism that I participate in by paying taxes? Like many of you, I’ve been struggling against that militarism in one way or another most of my adult life, and I don’t see where confessing our complicity in it once again or repenting of it one more time does any good. We’re still complicit, of course. Given the fact that we choose to live here and given the structure of our society, we can’t help but be complicit in our profound structural sin. But viewing it through the lens of personal sinfulness doesn’t get

us any closer to an appropriate response. Perhaps a better image would be bondage ... or exile, either of which might lead to a community response against the Powers that have bound us (or have exiled us).

Ultimately, of course, the case for broadening our understanding of sin and salvation is that it leads to a much richer and more adequate understanding of our place in the world. It gives us a better picture of what's wrong with us and a better map for finding the way ever more deeply into the Kingdom of God where our brokenness can be healed. *Salvation* is, at the very least, available in this world. It's light in our darkness, sight to the blind, enlightenment, liberation for captives, return from exile, healing of our infirmities, resurrection from the land of the dead, and so on

Many of us have been deeply involved in studying our American Empire and figuring out together how to respond to it. Right now we're looking at it together through a course at the Servant Leadership School. Especially after the election there's been a deep sense of there being something very wrong with our nation, and people have wanted to come together to know how to respond. We recognized at a more visceral level after the election what we'd known before, that the sin of our nation is not simply the result of our leaders charging off in the wrong direction. The election made it even more clear that within the entire society is a blindness to our place in the world, a captivity to the media and the large corporations, a cancer in the democracy, an addiction to consumerism leading to death, all of which allow and encourage our leaders to take us where they have. A very powerful image for me has been exile: I no longer live in the country that was once home or among the people I once knew. I've been thrown out and am depending upon God to guide me home.

The reality of the power of Empire is that one can't participate in the society without participating in the Empire and its evil. Other than emigrate, there is no choice except some degree of complicity. So how does one respond? What do you do?

Well, for openers, of course, you do what you can to reduce your complicity. Marja and I, just to take one small example, have tried to live more simply in order to reduce our personal ecological footprint and perhaps encourage others to do the same. But as we confirmed this week in a little quiz I found on the Internet, we still use far more than our share of the world's resources. In fact, it's almost impossible to live in urban America without using more than our share. So, what are we supposed to do? Ask for forgiveness for having been born here (or in Marja's case, married into the family)? No. Are we supposed to feel guilty for having chosen to involve ourselves in the brokenness of the city rather than raise our own food on a commune in the country? No, those are not helpful responses to the real nature of the bondage we suffer as

Americans.

A broader understanding of what's wrong—which includes more than just personal sin—gives us a deeper vision of what healing might look like. If we see ourselves in exile, we can call on God to lead us home. We can follow God's leading. If we feel oppressed by the Dominant Consciousness, we'll need to work together as an alternative community to create parallel structures that liberate us and offer liberation to others. Using different images of our fallenness leads to different responses.

As I understand what's happening in our Servant Leadership School class, most of us will continue resisting Empire and building the Kingdom in our individual and collective ways, as we have been doing. But I also see coming a deeper recognition of our exile together, which will bind us into community in a deeper resistance. Our missions, for instance, can become more than individual projects that offer healing to this group or that. They can become part of a network of institutions working to manifest the Kingdom of God: spreading light in the darkness, giving sight to the blind, offering liberation from captivity, and (especially) offering us all a way home from exile.

I've gotten a little ways away from the Confession and Absolution in our liturgy that I started with, but I think it's all related. As we work this year with Borg's book and others, trying to rearticulate our faith and its implications for our lives together, we'll want, I think, to take a look at how we use the written word. As Borg suggests, taking these different images of separation seriously will affect the words we use in liturgy. (You may have noticed a change in our confession and absolution this morning.)

One small suggestion would be to vary the images of fallenness we use in our liturgy, especially during the time of Confession and Absolution. (We'd even have to come up with different titles from Confession and Absolution. We don't say that we "*confess* our exile or need *absolution* for our bondage.") I don't mean for Confession and Absolution to get lost: Some weeks we'd use it, but other weeks would find us using different metaphors for our fallenness in this world.

It seems to me that our life with one another in this community gets more and more exciting as we move together into the Kingdom of God.

[1] Borg, Marcus, *The Heart of Christianity*, p 166