

**Understanding Sin** Readings: Mt. 6:1-6, 16-21; Is. 58:1-12 Ash Wednesday/A  
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfriedt; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 3/1/17

Last year, a parishioner brought me a bar of “Jesus Soap.” The label on the box reads: “You can be as bad as you want all day and then at night, simply wash away your sins!” Of course, this bar of soap is a joke meant to get a chuckle. But it does beg the question: “What exactly is sin and how do we rid ourselves of them?”

Sin comes in two forms: *Sin* with a big *S* and *sins* with a small *s*. *Sin* with a big *S* is perhaps the most heart breaking of the two. This kind of Sin describes the state of alienation we find ourselves in when our relationships are broken. It could be our relationship with others, our relationship with God, or even our relationship with ourselves. Whenever we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves, whenever we place our own desires at the center of the universe instead of God’s, whenever we do not respect and honor ourselves as beloved children of God, then we are in a state of *Sin*. This means that we are alienated from our true selves, thus denying ourselves the opportunity to love fully.

For instance, if we resent a family member for not living up to our expectations, then there is a gap in that relationship which creates a sense of alienation. The “churchy” term for this disconnection with another human being is called *Sin* with a capital *S*. Why would anyone want to continue to live in such a state of alienation?

The second form of sin are those *sins* with a small *s*. These are the willful choices that hurt relationships. Most of us engage in these kinds of sins, not because we are inherently bad, but because we want something and we fear that goodness will not get it for us. These kinds of sins include things like uncharitable speech, using others for our own advantage, stealing, lying, cheating, prejudice, selfishness, and our waste and pollution of creation.

Today, we have gathered together as a community of faith to make a corporate declaration of our sins (both small *s* and large *S*). This is called the “Litany of Penitence.” It begins with confessing our sins, a public acknowledgement of how we have missed the mark. We then kneel before God, contrite in heart, asking for forgiveness. However, in order to be truly free from alienation and stop the cycle of broken relationships, we need to uncover the reasons why we keep on doing the things we do.

Br. Mark Brown {SSJE} once said: “We are very imperfect vehicles for the embodiment of Divine Grace. We’re all driving around on at least one flat tire with missing or malfunctioning parts. Broken as we are, the impulse is still there,” to close the gaps in our lives so that we can fully love, experiencing joy along the way.” How do we close those gaps?

In today’s gospel, Jesus hints at going deeper in our prayer life. Instead of practicing the spiritual disciplines in order to get attention and admiration from others, we need to check our motivations and practice our faith as avenues for grace. This especially applies to the practice of prayer.

Instead of relying solely on public prayer (much of which is rote), we need to go deeper. This means doing that inner work and discovering the hurts and motivations that keep us in a state of alienation. Jesus teaches his disciples: “Whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” What does he mean by this admonition?

Jesus knows that there is no inner room in a Jewish, one-room house, so he must be referring to a different kind of prayer. Contemplative prayer is a kind of private prayer that can clean out the unconscious garbage that keeps us alienated. Contemplative prayer can heal those old wounds and old tapes that continue to deny us our freedom to love fully and live joyfully.

Today, this journey of freedom to repair the gaps in our relationships begins with the imposition of ashes and the Litany of Penitence. But this is only a start. In the coming weeks during the season of Lent, make a commitment to set aside some time for solitude and quiet prayer. In this posture of prayer, you will not only open yourself up to God’s grace, but you will also gain a better understanding of why you do the things you do that hurt yourself and others.

For instance, if you tend to lash out in anger, try to understand the motivation behind this emotion. What are you afraid of? Do you need to heal from wounds of the past? Is it a symptom of depression or being stuck in a hopeless situation? Once we understand the what and the why, we can then take the steps needed to heal.

“Almighty and everlasting God, you hate nothing you have made and forgive the sins of all who are penitent: Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we worthily lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of you, The God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness.” {BCP 264}