

What about sin?

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“We don’t take sin seriously enough.”

“We have lost the concept of sin.”

Sooner or later someone always says something along those lines when talking about grace, don’t they? I mean, sometimes it’s me. In a certain sense we can’t talk about grace without talking about sin. If we don’t make the connection, we may not really understand grace well. On the other hand we don’t need to belabor the point, all of us experience sin and feel its presence.

Now, of course, there is sin and there is sin. Sin can be understood as breaking the rules and sin can be understood as disconnection and separation from God. Each of these conceptions of sin has its place but I think part of being human is the knowledge that “something” is wrong. As humans we know, we sense, we feel that life is not as it should be. We know this, even if we can’t articulate it, we know that something is missing, or broken, or lost. We are disconnected and separated from God. We can’t ever really lose sin or fail to take it seriously. Sin is deeply part of being human.

We can lose the language to talk about sin. What do we call our sense of disconnection from something or someone important and necessary? The Christian tradition uses the word “sin.” It comes with all sorts of inferences and connotations. For some of us the word carries so many problems that it is simply not helpful. Sin has too often been used as a club or goad to drive people to unhealthy and unhelpful places. Sometimes the language we use causes more problems than it solves.

Even if we don’t have the language to talk about it, our experience remains. It is impossible for us not to take our sense of disconnection and separation seriously. We can ignore it for a while, and sometimes quite a while. Some of us are extremely good at that. Eventually we all are confronted with the fundamental discomfort and isolation of being human. I don’t think it is possible for us to lose the concept of sin

or to fail to take sin seriously. It is possible for us to not know how to talk about it, how to express our isolation and discomfort and fear. Everyone knows sin, participates in it, experiences it, whether we have the language to express it or not.

What many of us don't have is the knowledge of grace. What many of us don't know is the love of God. What many of us don't understand is that we have value and worth simply because we are beloved children of God. We can have glimpses of it, if our eyes are open. There are those times when we feel at peace, settled, and loved. We have those experiences when life is right and good. We all have those experiences of grace. We all have a sense that there is more. More than we can imagine. More that loves us. More that cares about us. What not all of us have is the language to talk about it. And we don't just lack the language, many of us lack the ability to recognize who this "more" is.

Sin we recognize. We don't need to spend a lot of time telling people about that. They know, we all know sin. It's all around us—in our homes, in our jobs, in our schools, every time we check the news. It is there when we leave the house in morning, it's there at work, it's present in our relationships, it haunts us just before we fall asleep. It is inescapable. No matter what we call it, or if we have no words for it, we all know sin.

What we have trouble with is grace. Grace as unconditional love. Grace as the knowledge that we, you and I, actually matter to something or someone larger than ourselves. Grace and the knowledge of grace is in short supply in our world. That God loves us and that we matter to God are not ideas and experiences that all of us understand. Many of us know we are sinners—whatever language we use. But not so many of us truly believe that we are more than sinners. There is more for us and to life, and that "more" is truly better. The grace of God is abundant. The love of God is abundant. God's grace and love surrounds us, but many of us have trouble believing it. That's why I talk about grace.

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