Don't be so negative

By James Sledge
May 13, 2015

Over the years I've heard my share of complaints regarding the "prayer of confession" in weekly worship. Not everyone feels this way, but it's not unusual to get a critique regarding such prayers' negativity. "Why do I need to say I'm no good week after week?" people ask.

I sometimes remind folks that many alcoholics find the mantra "I'm Joe, and I'm an alcoholic" to be anything but negative. It is instead a truth-telling statement that opens them to new possibilities, and prayers of confession can be understood in much the same way.

However, I do think the church has overplayed the sin hand at times. We've spoken of sin as making us so appalling that God can't possibly love us without resorting to some sort of trickery to remove our stench, namely the cross. God so loved the world, but apparently, this involves holding her nose while looking the other way until Jesus has done his magic.

I blame Greek philosophy for some of the problem here. When an Eastern, Jewish, apocalyptic faith met Western thought, there were bound to be some problems. The God of Israel got re-imaged through Western eyes. Narratives got turned into doctrines and a dynamic and multifaceted God morphed into static perfection. To make matters worse, sin became an inherited problem traced back to Adam and Eve. The devil tempted them and we've been living with that baggage ever since. Never mind that there is no devil in the Genesis creation stories.

And so we in the church deserve some of the bad press we get about sin. However, that doesn't mean sin is some terrible, negative idea in contrast to the rosy views of the prevailing culture. While the typical American probably does think of herself as reasonably "good" as opposed to evil, our culture actually bombards us with images that are decidedly negative. "There is something wrong with you," says much of the advertising we see daily.

We are not pretty enough, successful enough, smart enough, rich enough, popular enough, and the list goes on and on. Our TV screens are too small and our smartphones are outdated. Our retirement portfolio is insufficient and our clothes are out of style. Much of life is a harried, stressful struggle to ensure we don't turn into the miserable wretches we're sure to become if we don't get good enough grades, attend a good college, make the right connections, get the right job, and on and on. And we are only as good as our latest performance. Our worth is about what we can produce and accomplish and achieve.

By contrast, a biblical understanding of sin is positively uplifting. The Bible says we are good at our core. What's more, God loves us and is committed to us. There's no denying that something is amiss. We are remarkably good at messing things up and engaging in self-destructive behavior. We are prone to be so worried about ourselves that we hurt others. But you don't need a Bible to tell you that, to realize that something (what the Bible calls sin) distorts us from being who we truly are (what the Bible calls salvation).

Prayers of confession are part of this process. They are not about unlovable humans becoming lovable because Jesus somehow sanitizes us sufficiently for God to be able to touch us. God's love simply is. God cannot hate or despise us. And as we come to realize this, we are free to drop the masks and facades we all construct. Trusting in God's remarkable love, we have no need for spin or image control. What is more, God's love can begin to transform us. We can begin to see others as God sees us, those who are loved and longed for. And all that sounds

pretty positive to me.

Originally posted at Spiritual Hiccups