

True Compassion
Ash Wednesday - February 25, 2009
Psalm 51

Perhaps my translation of Psalm 51 was sarcastic. But doesn't this psalm seem over the top in the guilt-and-sinfulness department? Don't you gnash your teeth when you say, "I have been wicked even from my birth, a sinner when my mother conceived me?"

It's true that some of us are good beating ourselves up. I ought to know; I'm good at kicking myself on a regular basis. Still, most of us (me included) hate having our shortcomings pointed out to us, much less admitting them out loud. We're willing to say we goofed; that we were "caught off-guard;" that mistakes were made; that we're only human and nobody is perfect, especially *some people* we could name but we won't because *we're* polite. We might add, "Please be patient; God isn't finished with me yet!"

But most of us balk at being called wicked; evil; unclean; a sinner from the moment of our conception. Even if we've done bad things, are we bad people? We think that the line about hating the sin but loving the sinner surely should apply in our case.

A number of recent articles and books talk about how many people, especially Americans, demand a religious buffet table. They pick and choose elements of belief from many sources, including

Buddhism and New Age spirituality. They pass over those big bowls of sin and guilt, and reject the carving station where a judgmental God is served. They load up on possibility thinking; they stock their spiritual platter with notions of an "inner divine spark" or of a deity who is gently encouraging, and who tolerates or positively affirms aspects of their behavior that the "Christian God" condemns.

We may sympathize with "spiritual grazers." "I don't believe that God is going to send us to hell just because we didn't dot all the i's and cross all the t's," one person told me. "Didn't Jesus do away with all of that?" Another person said, "I believe in a God of love and acceptance. He's disappointed when I don't live up to my potential, but he's there to encourage me to do better. After all, he created me the way I am. The only sin is in not embracing that." Still another person said that by labeling people as sinners, we destroy part of their identity and de-humanize them. "Look what happens when someone is on trial in a capital murder case," this individual said. "How are they described? As monsters. As inhuman, or sub-human. That's the only way we as a society can legitimize killing them: by taking away their humanity. It starts when we use that Biblical language of sin, wickedness and evil. We have to get away from that and remind ourselves that people are not inherently evil, even when they commit crimes that outrage us."

Many voices speak out against pinning on anyone the label of "sinner." Given that we're all burdened by genetic traits, family upbringing, and historical or societal circumstances that cause us to stumble; given that nobody has the wisdom, strength or even plain old information we need in order to "get it right" all the time, *shouldn't we err on the side of compassion and tolerance? What possible good can come of reciting Psalm 51 as if it were actually true?!*

If sin were simply a matter of not having followed all the rules; of not having our paperwork filled out properly before sending it in to the Big Bureaucracy in the Sky, we might have a case. But what if sin were more like a diagnosis of cancer of the soul? What if the One whom some people dismiss as "your Christian God" keeps harping about sin is because it really is deadly to us, to our relationships with other people, and to our relationship with God himself? What if that same "Christian God" wants to cure us - all of us? Permanently?

I know that many of you (or someone close to you) have battled cancer. It's all-out war. There's no such thing as having "a little bit of cancer" that can just be ignored, winked at, or accepted. You know what "a little bit of cancer," left to its own devices, can do to the body. Doctors use every tool at their disposal to destroy cancer, or to slow its progression and limit its ability to damage vital organs.

Even when they can't eliminate every cancer cell, constant vigilance is necessary. You can't re-label cancer as "a minor illness."

What if sin is more like *that* than it is like "not following all the rules?" What if our attempts to ignore or re-label sin as "mistakes" are like saying, "Oh, it's just a stubborn cold?" What if our difficulty calling ourselves "sinners" is as dangerous as when someone can't wrap their minds around being a cancer patient?

What if some - not all, of course, but some - of the rhetoric about being tolerant, non-judgmental, accepting of who we are, is misguided compassion? What if *real*/self-acceptance is saying, "I gotta face it: there's a sort of cancer gnawing at my heart and soul?" What if genuine compassion consists not in open-ended tolerance, but in saying, "You're in a tough battle. I know because so am I. It hits us all in different ways, but we've got the same diagnosis. Let's go for treatment together - my doctor is the best in the world. We can put ourselves in his hands, and hold each other up when the treatment gets too rough to take by ourselves."

My friend Margaret Olson, who is a pastor in Nebraska, was on our prayer list for some time. She had an aggressive form of leukemia; recently she received a stem-cell transplant from a complete stranger. Without it, she'd be dead in a year. With it - well, she's

over 100 days post-transplant; she's back home, she feels good, and her blood work looks excellent. She still faces the risk of infection, relapse, or graft-vs.-host disease. She's become knowledgeable about cell counts, liver panels, dosage protocols, and other medical arcana of which she wishes she could have remained ignorant. There are things she has been advised to avoid, and things she's been urged to do in order to remain as healthy as possible, for as long as possible. A huge team of doctors, pharmacists, nurses, technicians, and prayer partners have supported her on the road to recovery.

*Isn't that what our lives as sinners is actually like? We're all born with a "terminal disease:" not one of us gets out of this world alive. When we're baptized, we're put under the care of the Divine Physician. We're given a transplant from his own Son - the *only* one who has come out alive from this terminal condition known as sinful human existence. We receive not stem cells, but his very Body and Blood as our chemotherapy. We're given not radiation but the Holy Spirit as the purifying fire that kills and raises us up. When we are marked with this ashy cross, it's like wearing that bracelet they put on your wrist in the hospital to identify whose patient you are.*

During Lent, we're urged to avoid certain things and regularly to practice others. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving: these things are the "support therapy" which bolsters what our Heavenly Physician is

accomplishing through his treatment. Not only that, we do them to help other patients bear up under the burden of their own treatment. And they're ways to reach out, in true sympathy and genuine compassion, to people struggling with their diagnosis who don't know where to turn for effective treatment.

Maybe if we understood sin this way, we could pray Psalm 51 rightly: nearly crushed by the awareness of the danger we're in; yet full of humble confidence and trust in our Divine Physician. He is utterly ruthless in exposing every "sin-cancer cell." He won't sugar-coat the diagnosis for us. His treatment is radical - sometimes appallingly so. It involves nothing less than death and resurrection. But He wants nothing less than a total cure - whatever it takes; however long it takes. He wants nothing less than human beings free from every symptom and side-effect of sin, evil, and death. He wants nothing less than each of us, living with His own Son's lifeblood coursing through our veins, His Son's compassion shaping every word we speak and breath we take. We bear His identifying mark. Let us commend ourselves into his hands and his care; encourage one another through our course of treatment; and journey through the Long Lent of our lives to His glorious and eternal Easter. Amen.