

“You Were Not Born a Sinner”
Rev. Bill Freeman
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Menifee United Church of Christ

A woman goes to confession. She says, “Father, forgive me, for I have sinned.” The priest says, “Well, what did you do?” The woman says, “I have committed the sin of having too much pride.” She says, “Every time I walk past a mirror, I look at myself and say, ‘You are beautiful.’” The priest takes a good look at the woman through the little holes in the confessional and says, “I have good news for you, ma’am. You didn’t sin. You made a mistake.”

That was not nice. I don’t think the woman sinned, because I’ve heard Oprah say that, when we walk past a mirror, we should look in the mirror and say, “You are beautiful!” So, if anything, I think the priest sinned for being mean, or maybe I sinned for telling this joke.

What is sin? We learned in seminary that sin simply means missing the mark, making an error, making a mistake. Many Christians believe that we were born sinners because of the doctrine of Original Sin. What is that, exactly? Where does that come from?

As you may know, it comes from the book of Genesis. There are two creation stories in Genesis. The second creation story, in Genesis chapters 2 and 3, says that Adam and Eve were created and God placed them in the Garden of Eden and told them to tend to the Garden. God told Adam, and presumably Adam told Eve, that they could eat of any tree in the Garden except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They couldn’t eat from that. Then, as we all know, the serpent came along and tempted Eve and Adam. They did eat of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They disobeyed God. And that’s called Original Sin. We, therefore, are perpetrators of Original Sin. We were born in Original Sin, so the doctrine says.

But what if Adam and Eve had not eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? Would we have knowledge of good and evil? If we didn’t have knowledge of good and evil, what would that make us? The people I know of that don’t know the difference between good and evil are called psychopaths and sociopaths. To psychopaths and sociopaths, good and evil are the same thing, so killing someone is no different, say, than eating an apple. So if we didn’t have the knowledge of good and evil, would we be psychopaths and sociopaths?

There is a second story of the creation in Genesis chapter one. God creates the heavens and the earth and God creates us in God’s image and God blesses us. Theologian Matthew Fox says that is the doctrine of Original Blessing, not Original Sin. I have to confess that I’m more of an Original Blessing than an Original Sin kind of guy. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is, too.

Jesus is walking along, according to the gospel of John, and he comes upon a blind man. The blind man has been blind since birth. The disciples ask, “Rabbi, who sinned that this man was born blind? Did this man sin or was it his parents that sinned?” Jesus answers, “Neither this man, nor his parents sinned.” What? How can that be? Shouldn’t Jesus have said, “Of course, this man and his parents sinned because they were born under the doctrine of Original Sin. They were born sinners.” But, as I understand it, Jewish people do not follow or believe in the doctrine of Original Sin. And, spoiler alert – Jesus was Jewish! So he probably didn’t believe in the doctrine of Original Sin, which wasn’t created until many years later. This man did not sin and his parents did not sin, Jesus says.

Jesus goes on to cure the man of his blindness, but he does it on the Sabbath. The Pharisees were all upset about that. They got all wiggled out, because Jesus did something on the Sabbath and you were not supposed to do anything on the Sabbath. Jesus says, “Oh, no, no, no. You can do good on the Sabbath. It’s OK to do good on the Sabbath.” So that’s where the doctrine of Original Sin comes from and we all, I suppose, make mistakes. But I don’t think we’re all born sinners.

When my daughter was born, 24 years ago, I was in the delivery room. I saw her being born. I gotta tell you, she didn’t look like an original sinner to me. She didn’t look like a sinner to me when she was born. She looked like she could have been born in a manger in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. But, she cried when she was born and, as we all know, from the Christmas carol – “Jesus, no crying he makes.” So my daughter was not perfect, but I don’t think she was born a sinner.

Although a couple of years later, her mom put her to bed and a few minutes later we heard, “Mommy!” Her mom went back in her bedroom and said, “Do not call Mommy again.” A few minutes later we heard, “Daddy!” Her mom went back in her room and said, “Don’t call Mommy or Daddy again.” Then a few minutes later we heard, and this is why she is going to become a lawyer, we heard, “Somebody!” It’s hard to accuse your daughter of being an Original Sinner when you’re laughing so hard.

I heard a preacher once, a radio preacher, say he could prove we are all born in sin. We’re perpetrators of Original Sin. He said, “Take a two-year-old, let’s say a two-year-old girl, and put her in the middle of the floor and tell her not to move and then leave the room. When she moves, then that proves that she was born a sinner, that we are all perpetrators of Original Sin.” Really?

I wonder what that radio preacher would have thought if he saw the news this past week, where a couple of twin boys, whose parents put them in their cribs with a video monitor on them, crawled out of their cribs and pulled cushions off the couches and the chairs and made a mess of the room. Then the parents went in and put the boys back in their cribs and cleaned up the room and the kids did it again. They got out of their cribs and messed up the room again. I can only imagine that that radio preacher would say, "See! That proves that they are Original Sinners, that they were born sinners!"

I think I have a way to prove that we are Original Sinners. Take that radio preacher and a televangelist and sit them in the middle of the floor and surround them with money and tell them not to take the money. Then leave the room. When they stuff their pockets with the money, then you know that we're Original Sinners. Or you know that some radio preachers and televangelists are money-grubbers.

There is a danger, it seems to me, to perpetuate the idea of Original Sin, to say that children are born sinners. I think some parents take that to mean that when their little children don't act like little adults, well, they are born sinners. They can be punished, and they can be punished severely. So I think that we Christians have to be careful with the way we use some words, because they could be dangerous.

"But wait a minute, Pastor! What if those parents are just trying to save their children from going straight to hell? Don't you believe that if they are sinners, if they don't obey, then they go straight to hell?" Well, I have to confess again that I am not 100% sure that hell exists. But if hell does exist, I don't believe in a God that sends children straight to hell. I believe in what Elbert Hubbard said. Not L. Ron Hubbard, Elbert Hubbard. Elbert Hubbard was a philosopher who lived at the turn of the last century. He says we are not punished for our sins, but by them. In other words, we are separated from God sometimes, separated from other people sometimes, because of our sin. Or we feel that way.

If somebody commits a murder and they're caught, put on trial, convicted, and sent to prison, they're separated from their loved ones. Usually prison conditions aren't very good, so they're living in hell on earth. If somebody commits a murder and they're not caught, maybe they flee the country, but they spend the rest of their lives looking over their shoulders, afraid that they will be caught, that's got to be hell on earth.

There are other sins, of course, besides murder. Sometimes we put more stock in things than in people or in God. Sometimes we put more importance in money than in people or God. Sometimes we put more importance in our prejudices than in people or in God. Our job as Christians is, in part, to help people who feel separated from people or from God. We can help people who feel separated from God by saying that we all make mistakes, we all commit errors, we all commit sins, but God forgives us for those. We are God's children, we can say, and God blesses us and loves us. God forgives us and God is not separated from us, no matter what we do. God is always with us.

Our job as Christians is, in part, to help people not feel separated from people. We can do that by telling them we all sin, we all commit errors, we all fall short of the mark. We can do that by saying that we are not defined by our mistakes, by our errors, by our sins, that there is redemption.

It's our job, in part, to let people know that it's far better to live in heaven on earth, than to live in hell on earth. Jesus told us that. Jesus told his disciples and us, "As you go, proclaim the good news: the kingdom of heaven has come near." In other words, the kingdom of heaven is all around us.

But there are some people who seem to be spiritually blind, like the blind man earlier. In fact, there are some people in Washington, D.C. who seem to be spiritually blind. I'm like Will Rogers, all I know is what I read in the papers, but are there some politicians who really want to eliminate Meals on Wheels for elderly poor people? Are there really some people in Washington, D.C. who wanted to cut 24 million people from the health care rolls? Are there really some people in Washington, D.C. who want to deport millions of immigrants and refuse to accept thousands of refugees into this country? Do those people really call themselves Christians? Didn't Jesus tell us to care for the poor? Didn't Jesus tell us to care for the ill? Didn't Jesus tell us to welcome the stranger, including the immigrant and the refugee? Wasn't Jesus himself an immigrant and a refugee when his parents fled and took him to Egypt when he was a child? So Jesus, might say that those people were born in sin. Or, they learned their sin at campaign rallies and fund raisers and from their rich benefactors who want tax breaks.

But for the most part, I believe that this is a wonderful world. Louis Armstrong believed that this is a wonderful world. Louis Armstrong, I think, lived in heaven on earth. Now for many years, I believe Louis Armstrong has been living in heaven above. Louis Armstrong sang about how this is a wonderful world. Louis Armstrong sang, "The colors of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky, are also on the faces of people going by. I see friends, shaking hands, saying how do you do. They're really saying I love you." Louis Armstrong is right. This is a wonderful world. This is not a sinful world.

Jesus knew that. Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When I was thirsty, you gave me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you welcomed me. When I was naked, you gave me clothing. When I was ill, you comforted me. When I was in prison, you visited me."

But this is not a perfect world. Jesus knew that as well. Jesus knew there was sin in the world. Jesus said, "When I was hungry, you did not give me something to eat. When I was thirsty, you did not give me something to drink. When I was a stranger, you did not welcome me. When I was naked, you did not clothe me. When I was sick, you did not comfort me. When I was in prison, you did not visit me."

But this is, I believe, a mostly good world. I believe that because I once was blind. I was born blind. I was born spiritually blind, but Jesus cured me of my blindness. At one time, I could not see the poor. I couldn't see the ill. I couldn't see the immigrant or the refugee. But then Jesus cured me of my blindness. Now I can see the poor and the ill and the immigrant and the refugee.

How about you? Were you born blind, spiritually blind? Has Jesus helped you to see the poor, the ill, the immigrant, the refugee? I hope so, because even if we did learn about good and evil thanks to Adam and Eve, we also have free will. We have the ability to choose good rather than evil. We have the ability to say to a person that's helpless, "Here, let me help you." We have the ability to see someone in need of a shoulder to lean on or cry on and we have the capacity to offer them our own shoulder. And I hope we do. And when we do, I believe we can pass a mirror, like that woman earlier, and say to ourselves, "You are beautiful," but also say, "and you were not born a sinner. You were born a winner." I can say that because I believe that the moment you were born, you won God's heart.

Let us pray:

God of love,

Help us to know that we are not born sinners.

Help us to know that we can choose to do good.

Help us to choose to do good.

Now and forevermore.

By the power of the Holy Spirit.

And in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

*(This sermon was delivered without manuscript or notes
and was transcribed from a recording of it.)*