“Sin” is one of those terms I sometimes think of as Biblical, or stained-glass, words, meaning that they seem to belong in the Bible but nowhere else. Others are “righteous,” “glory,” and a few more. They strike the ear as old-timey, irrelevant. That’s convenient, especially in the case of “sin,” because it makes it easy to think of them as not having too much to do with life today.

Today’s collect does an unusually good job of framing our readings this morning. We pray to be “set free from the bondage of sin,” even if that phrase, is one of those that sounds like it belongs in the Bible but nowhere else. That’s a problem, isn’t it? As soon as we can say that about a word or phrase it can begin to make the whole of the Bible seem like something outdated and irrelevant to our lives today. It puts the Bible and its teachings at a safe distance from us, making it a kind of artifact or something historically interesting. It certainly becomes something less than the living word of God.

One of the ways we have made the word “sin” more palatable for us is to seize on one definition derived from the Hebrew word, translated into Greek, translated into English, that Hebrew word meaning “missing the mark.” It’s more palatable than other associations because thinking of “missing the mark” is a lot easier than thinking about our nasty misdeeds or wrongdoing. After all, we’ve just missed the mark. We’ll do better next time—our vision will be clearer, our aim will be sharper.

That Hebrew word is only one of a handful translated “sin.” It appears that there are between five and eight others, trending toward drifting off the path and even deliberately straying from the path.

(By the way, you’ll undoubtedly hear at least one sermon from me gratefully emphasizing that particular take on sin—missing the mark—but that’s for another day.)

Missing the mark—in the sense of the archer’s arrow missing the bullseye—is, again, a bit more comfortable for us than the definitions that imply willfulness. But it hardly explains “bondage,” does it? That’s a bit different from occasionally missing the mark—even a willful decision resulting in an unkind word or judgmental thought or little white lie or creative definition of what qualifies as a tax exemption.

No, “bondage” sounds like something not subject to normal decision-making nor sheer act of will. If so, it wouldn’t feel like being held captive by it.

The obvious example of this type of sin that holds us bondage is, addiction, and I’ve used the example often. In fact, addiction itself is not to my mind sinful any more than some other disease. But actions taken by addicts certainly do qualify. So, paradoxically, there is a moral component to that kind of disease. Yep: addiction to alcohol, opioids, narcotics, compulsive behaviors like gambling, overeating, and more. Much more. Perhaps I’ve already told you about the 12-step program for compulsive talkers: on and on andon. Kidding.

But is there anyone who has not had to deal with other—let’s call them—bad habits? I mean bad habits in the sense of patterns of behavior that are difficult, if not impossible, to stop on one’s own. Only each person can identify his or her behaviors that qualify.

Not being able to choose the behavior or thought or reaction, whatever it might be, or falling back on that thing as the primary means of seeking comfort or relief or distraction from doing some other necessary but unpleasant task.

Whatever effects such behavior might have on others, this is about the consequences to the person held in thrall by this unthinking, automatic behavior.

These can even come in the guise of some virtue, such as being concerned for others’ feelings—a good thing. But when that becomes an unthinking desire to please others at all costs, including telling the truth, it’s no loner about others’ feelings. It’s an unrealistic obsession with seeking approval, protecting oneself from others’ displeasure or criticism. When that desire takes on the nature of addiction it’s paralyzing and results in an inability to make simple decisions.

Of course, that’s only one example. Others include the need to be right at all costs. Or a pathological focus on one’s physical appearance. Or the need to have certain possessions or a certain, illogical, amount of money in a bank account, wildly beyond what one really needs. And, again . . . on and on.

Please note: it’s not the behavior, thought, or anything else that is the problem *per se*. It’s the extreme need to do whatever that thing might be in order to have a sense of value as a human being.

When one reaches the point of asking, “Why in the world am I doing this *again*?” and continuing to do it . . . that’s one definition, I would say, of being in bondage. In the words of the collect, in bondage to sin.

Carl Jung, among many physicians, psychologist, clergy, and others, has been quoted as telling a man with an extreme case of alcoholism that there was no hope for him outside of a profound spiritual experience—his actual words, apparently, were “a religious conversion.”

That spiritual experience can come in different ways, to be sure—the burning bush variety (not unique to Moses, except in a literal sense), a gradual dawning of a sense of God’s presence, or through the words and actions of other people, at least one person.

That names only a few means.

Some of us have been blessed with several of these kinds of experiences. Whatever else marks them, they have in common one essential element: something, someone, beyond the individual’s will and determination. Less religious folk might call this, simply, a higher power; i.e., a power greater than oneself.

We Christians have some handy shorthand for this—God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity. Those names all work for us.

I said earlier—way back at the beginning of this sermon—that the collect effectively frames today’s readings. So I figure I should mention at least a couple of instances to illustrate my point.

Right out of the gate we have Isaiah—a giant among prophets—coming clean about himself: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips.” And God, through God’s messenger, the seraph, heard Isaiah’s surrender and confession, touched his lips with a live coal, and said, “your guilt has departed, your sin is blotted out.” And when the Lord asks, “Whom shall I send?” Isaiah can say, “Here I am; send me!”

Then there’s Paul, the second-only to burning-bush figure. Paul, the road-to-Damascus character acknowledging his previous sins to the Corinthians, including his persecution of the Church, as if to say, “If God can do this for me, God can do the same for you.”

Peter, the keeper of the keys of the kingdom, the rock on which the Church is founded, had this to say upon seeing the divine shining through the actions of his friend and teacher: “Go away from me, for I am a sinful man!” Jesus’ response? The other half of today’s collect—not only forgiveness but entrance into the abundant life he come to bring to all of us—fishing for people, which translates into bringing joy and freedom to others. Or, bringing others into the freedom of that abundant life.

We know the rest of the story: it was not a cake walk for Peter and the other apostles. Rather, imprisonment and persecution of the worst kind. But it was freedom from the bondage of lives marked by judging others, following countless rules and regulations and fearing the forces ranged against them. They lived fully and boldly and showed others how to do the same.

Our lives are mean to be filled with God’s love as well, filled with life-giving experiences of loving each other, loving God, loving the unlovable. And perhaps that last most of all.

Set us free, O Lord, from the bondage of our sins, and give us the liberty of abundant life.”

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