

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC  
March 13, 2011 The First Sunday of Lent

The Rev. Catherine Powell

Scripture: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7 (The Fall); Matthew 4:1-11 (The Temptation of Christ)

Well, I already spoke on Ash Wednesday about how difficult it is for us to approach the very concept of sin. Part of that is because we confuse it with our emotional difficulty with shame and what psychology might call self-esteem issues.

But even if we have problems with addressing sin, we are familiar with the reality. We know that life isn't all that we dream it could be. We know that people don't act as we wish they would. We know that passivity on the one hand and activity on the other—can cause us problems. “We have not done those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,” as the classic confession has it.

It's important that we try to disconnect from our *feelings* about sin so that we can *think* a bit about it. Being able to take a step back from it may help us know how to respond to it.

Our Old Testament lesson today is the story traditionally called The Fall. Adam and Eve, though they have everything they need and more, are tempted to get just one more thing—the apple. They give in, though we can defend them a tiny bit by saying that it was the Devil—a force outside themselves—that encouraged them to do it.

As an aside let me say that we should be way beyond laying the responsibility of this on Eve. Even the recent popes—not always known for being forward thinking about women—have made clear statements that the Genesis myths are about all of humanity, male and female equally.

This story is a myth—not a myth in the sense that it's a made-up, untrue story, quite the contrary. It's a myth in the sense that it's a story that sums up the deepest truth that our ancient ancestors could express. It speaks of the truth that the world is not quite as it should be even though beauty and abundance lie all around us. It speaks of the truth that somehow we human beings participate actively in what's wrong with the world even though it isn't completely our fault.

If we look at the John Donne poem which is today's second reading, we see this truth expressed forcefully. The poet realizes—as St. Paul had centuries earlier—that he does not act in the way he wishes he could. He feels he **cannot** act as he should. He is like a city held by an enemy, and all the gentle approaches of spiritual advice are not enough to retake a city. He wants God to grab him forcefully, to pull him out of this mess we call sin.

The idea of original sin comes from our recognition that sin—though perhaps finding expression in our willed actions—is something that is greater than we are. Though theologians have long discussed the idea of sin as bigger than individual persons—after all, that's what the concept of original sin is saying—most churches end up talking about sin as if it is a phenomenon experienced and acted out by individuals. If we limit sin to a personal problem, we risk trivializing it. We've all known people who, as children, had to scour their memories to come up with something to confess. Many of my Catholic friends talk about their early experiences of formal confession when they had to go into the mysterious (and scary) confessional booth in order to beg God's forgiveness for things like licking their sister's ice cream cone while she wasn't looking. If we go far down this path, then conversation about sin begins to look silly and meaningless. Is God really worried over the fact that I called my brother a dumbhead? OK, small actions can grow into larger ones and children must be corrected and redirected—but we don't

want them to think that these are the kinds of things the Holy One of heaven may condemn them for! (As an aside, I think the Roman Catholic concept of children having private confession as an option is a good one; moral concerns can truly bother sensitive children.) Some of the private sins we obsess about are truly petty.

Surely God's heart breaks over bigger things! Over the tens of thousands of refugees turned back at this border and starved to death at that one; over the cruelty of one ethnic, racial, or social group toward another—cruelty that leads to imprisonments, murders, and suicides; over the tendency of countries to—all too easily—arm themselves and bomb the life out of their next door neighbors; over cultures and systems that claim moral neutrality while celebrating greed and consumption that leave some hungry and homeless.

Some thinkers worry that if we think about sin as a corporate phenomenon, we will lose our sense of responsibility. But it seems to work in the opposite way. If we think about sin only as an individual problem, we attack it by worrying about small things—should I eat that second cookie? We should stay alert to these small, continuing moral concerns --but we should not ignore the fact that we and our neighbors and our children are caught up in bigger issues, in patterns of behavior laid out in us before we are even aware, in systems that work in our society and in our world that push down the poor and that leave us blind to the results of our daily actions.

Once we think about these things—once we begin to see the chain of events, the subtle assumptions behind how groups behave—we don't *avoid* responsibility, we take it on. The big sin problem isn't easily solved, of course! I can't just step out of the chain of production and consumption, for example but I can become part of counter-cultural systems, work actively to protect my children from imbibing certain values, and do my part to influence groups and systems around me.

Perhaps most important, I can begin to think about social problems as problems for individuals but also, crucially, as systemic problems. I can ally myself with groups that challenge norms I consider unjust. Bishop Barbara Harris had a favorite story about this: Once there were a group of people who lived by a river. Occasionally they would look out over the water and see a flailing child floating by. Then they would swim out or paddle out and rescue the child. They would take the child in and care for it. They noticed that more children were out there—so they built bigger canoes, and then a big house for them. They took turns caring for these little survivors. One day a traveler came to their isolated community and saw what they were doing. The traveler's host proudly showed off the children's house and told of the efforts the community made. He also admitted that he wished he could do even more. Sometimes he worried about not volunteering more than one day a week to help. But rather than the simple praise he expected, the traveler cried, "It's great you're saving these children, but why in the world aren't a group of you going up the river to stop whoever is throwing them in?"

Sin, great and small, is an individual problem, yes, and it must be addressed individually. But, more importantly, sin is a group phenomenon, it is a corporate situation, and we must act together as a group to identify and address it.

Work consulted:

*Original Sin Revisited* by Marjorie Suchocki, accessed at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org). Suchocki's article lists works she quotes by Schleiermacher, Reinhold Niebuhr, Cornel West, Rosemary Ruether, and others.