



Presbyterian Mission
**Office of Christian
Formation**

You'll Never Walk Alone

UKirk Lenten Resource - Lent 2

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The Byzantine Orthodox Icon of the Prodigal Son (Athanasios Clark, 2004)



Theme - Sin

Overview: Psalm 51 talks a lot about sin. Sin is a word that people use, but perhaps haven't spent much time thinking about. But we should think seriously about sin. At the same time, we should not think about sin without also thinking about God and God's love for us.

Scriptures

Psalm 51

Luke 15:11-32

Background

It's not possible to think comprehensively about sin in a short Lenten devotional. But we can lift up a few thoughts.

Often we think about sin in terms of breaking rules. And it is. But sin is more than "just" breaking rules. Sin is also, anything that keeps us from being fully human. It's anything that keeps us from truly living as persons created in the image of God. Sin is whatever separates us from God.

We may think of sin as primarily personal or individual. We make decisions - to do or to not do. We can do things that will separate us from God, that will keep us from being who we have been created to be. Or we can not do things that will connect us with God and with our truest selves.

While personal, sin is also communal. Communities and nations can sin. Communities and nations make decisions that help all of us live fully flourishing lives, or not. As members of the community, we participate, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly in these decisions. Sometimes it's not that an unjust decision was intentionally made, but over time unjust conditions develop.

For example, when we purchase shoes or clothes they may be made by people in unsafe or unjust working conditions. We can participate in these unjust, sinful conditions in spite of our best efforts to be ethical consumers. Simple daily activities can contribute to unjust systems. We become entangled- knowingly and unknowingly- in sin as part of society.

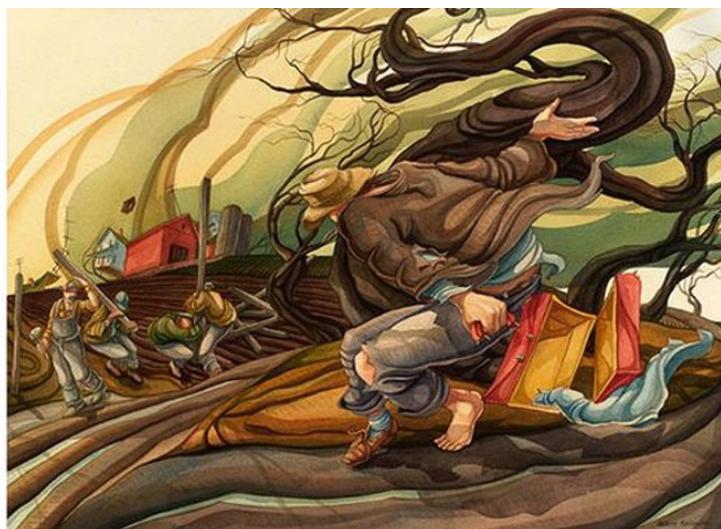
In addition to rule-breaking, the idea of sin in the Bible's original languages also contains the sense of missing the mark, of going wrong, losing oneself, or wandering from the path of uprightness.

Parables are stories that cause us to think and wrestle with meaning. We often think about the parable of the Prodigal Son focusing on the actions of characters in the story, the father or one of the sons. But could this also be a parable about sin? The son lured by the enticements of the world, wanders off the path of uprightness. He makes bad decisions, “dissolute living” the text says. He ends up in a famine, for which he is not responsible, feeding pigs. And then the text says “he came to himself”. He realizes he has missed the mark, he has lost himself. He confesses first to himself. He decides to stop wondering and turns to the path home. His father enthusiastically greets him, and forgives him.

Earlier we said that sin is whatever separates us from God. It is whatever keeps us from living the lives we were created to have. That separation may be individual or communal, intentional or unintentional. Theologian Shirley Guthrie puts it like this, “In short, sin is not loving and not being willing to let ourselves be loved.”*

*Christian Doctrine, Rev. Ed. Shirley C. Guthrie 1994, Westminster John Knox Press, p 221

Explore



The Prodigal Son, Robert Barnum 1998

What do you see? What does this tell you about the story? Where do you think you would be positioned in the painting?

Discuss

1. What are some of the images and metaphors used for “sin” in Psalm 51. Are there different images in different translations?
2. What is the psalmist asking God to do about their sin? What images are being used?
3. What examples of communal sin? How are we called to react and engage them?
4. Can you think of other images and metaphors used in the Bible to describe sin?
5. Does the parable of the Prodigal Son offer any insights into sin and forgiveness?

Reflect

1. When you hear the word “sin”, what do you think of?
2. Does thinking of sin as missing the mark or losing yourself, change how you think about sin?
3. What is your reaction to the idea, “In short, sin is not loving and not being willing to let ourselves be loved.”?

Engage

- ❖ Look at the art in [Calvin University's Prodigal Son art collection](#). What pieces invoke a reaction? Why? Share with each other your reaction to some of this art.
- ❖ Biblical scholar Elaine Wainwright in her article, [“Loss and Restoration”](#) on the prodigal son story states, “Jesus does not “complete” the story. Indeed it is a parable that evokes our engagement with the unfolding threads. We are not told if the elder son joins the feast to celebrate his brother’s return. Does he feast and dance with the rest of the household and rejoice? We do not know. What we have seen, however, is that the parable is drawn from the experience of the human community: a father, his two sons and his household. The material world of estates, food and food production (or lack of such as in famine) engages us as readers.” Alone or with your group ask:
 - ❖ How would you finish the story? What happened the next day? The next year* If you were to set the story in an alternative, contemporary “human community,” what would it be?
 - ❖ Would it be within a family? How does the story change if you put it into a different interpersonal or cultural context?
 - ❖ What is the main message of the parable for you? How would you convey that message to someone who had never read this story before?

Going Forth

- ❖ **Pick** one piece of Prodigal Son art and spend some time in contemplation with it
- ❖ **Draw** your own interpretation of either Psalm 51 or the Prodigal Son.
- ❖ **Listen** - [“Find Our Way to Love”](#) by The Many

Prayers of the People

Prayer: Prodigal Grace (inspired by Luke 15: 11-32)

Holy and Gracious God
You, the one of prodigal grace
We give you thanks for the gift of life
and for the blessings of this life,
for family and friends and
love abundant.

Lead us through the trials
the suffering and sorrow
the challenges and struggles
the tired time, despair and bleak places,
back to you, and
love abundant.

Be with those who weep
or cannot sleep
who have no peace
who seek release
and comfort them with
love abundant.

Fill us with hope,
sustained in your mercy,
with patience and stamina
upheld by your Holy Spirit
in your prodigal grace.

Transform us and all our broken ways
transforms us that we can be
made whole

And in wholeness
may we be
the hands and heart of Christ. Amen.

~ written by Terri, and posted on [RevGalBlogPals](#).