

# The Human Condition

sermon digest

March 8, 2009

Psalm 14; Romans 3:10-24

larry dipboye

At the height of the Great Awakening in the Congregational Church of Enfield, Connecticut, 1741, Jonathon Edwards preached his famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Viewed as the classic example of Great Awakening preaching, the near-sighted Edwards read from a manuscript while people in the congregation swooned and cried aloud. His graphic warning was designed to create panic:

Your wickedness makes you, as it were, heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

By the 1920's, preaching against sin had become stylish in America. A man of few words, President Calvin Coolidge earned the nickname "Silent Cal" attending Washington parties with his vivacious, chatty wife Grace. As the story goes, the President returned from a Sunday morning worship service and was greeted by the First Lady with the stock question, "What did the preacher talk about?" The President responded, "Sin." Grace insisted, "Well, what did he say?" Coolidge retorted, "He was against it."

In 1960, John Steinbeck traveled the USA in a pickup camper with his dog Charley and gathered stories about his rediscovery of America. Before leaving Vermont, Steinbeck decided to attend a church service. He shaved, polished his shoes, dressed up in a Sunday suit, located a rural Calvinist church, and took his seat on a back pew to take in the experience. Accustomed in the city to hearing from a "psychiatric priesthood" that, "our sins aren't really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control," Steinbeck was soon to find, "There was no such nonsense in this church." The minister had "tool-steel eyes and a delivery like a pneumatic drill," and he "reassured us that we were a pretty sorry lot." Steinbeck was impressed: "This Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me." He took mischievous pride in finding, "I wasn't a naughty child but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it." Consistently sarcastic, Steinbeck wrote that he put five dollars in the collection plate, shook hands with everyone he could reach, and delighted in "a sense of evil-doing that lasted clear through till Tuesday." (*Travels with Charley*, pp. 77ff)

Perhaps we laugh to keep from crying.

**The pervasive reality of evil in the world is the fundamental human problem.** Biblically the problem is located at the root of human existence in the disobedience of the first humans. Eve became the designated scapegoat for everyone's failure because she yielded to temptation in the Garden. Sin is thus described as a disease that has been passed down through the ages infecting every human generation and universally present in all human life. The primary biblical word in both the Hebrew and Greek is "miss." The favorite New Testament word *hamartia* has the root meaning of "missing the mark." No one really debates the fact of human imperfection at every level of life whether one is speaking of moral failure or intellectual error. But the biblical idea is a bit more serious. It concerns misconduct. Missing the mark is worse than falling short of the target of perfection. Life is a mess not just because we make mistakes. Certainly, everyone does. The human condition flies in the face of God. It is a transgression of holy law.

The problem of sin is not so simple. Jesus was offended by the legalism of the Pharisees and may well have enjoyed Steinbeck's sense of humor with his visit to a Vermont church. The scribal story injected in the Gospel of John (8:1-11) about the woman caught in adultery and brought before Jesus for judgment on her sin comes down to the word: "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." Historically the sins of religion have rivaled the worst tyranny of the worst dictators in history. Bishop John Shelby Spong took on the Bible in his recent book *The Sins of Scripture* identifying both texts in the Bible and interpretations that prefer an angry God to the God of love revealed in Christ. In the US we readily recognize the religious fanaticism of Islamic terrorists. Can we also see the terrorism of Christian and Jewish radicals claiming divine right for the dominance of the Jewish State and inciting war to drive out Palestinians? Churches in the US defended the institution of slavery in the nineteenth century and continued to defend the practice of racial discrimination throughout the twentieth century. Most denominations divided north from south over the issue of slavery. The Ku Klux Klan has always claimed Christian support for its burning crosses.

I was a young pastor in West Point, Kentucky, and didn't quite know what to say the first time Mr. Culver greeted me after the morning service with a strong hand-shake, a big smile, and a glance at his feet before saying, "Preacher, you just walked all over my shoes this morning." My first impulse was to apologize and to

offer reparation for my clumsy pulpit manners. Then, I learned that this was a word of congratulations. A sermon was supposed to inflict pain addressing sin and divine anger. Even the saints were supposed to squirm with discomfort. I learned, however, that most folks did not want to hear anything from the pulpit that sounded vaguely like a critical evaluation of "us." Sin-preaching was to be applauded as long it was about "them." Sometimes "them" were the criminals, the drunks, and the no-good lazy slackers who were a drag on society. "Them" were certainly the outsiders, the foreigners, and the heretics from other religions, including Catholics and Pentecostals. I think that we had a notion that if we created a big enough protest to the sins outside the church, we could divert attention from our own lifestyle that might come into question. Opposition to sinners became an ironic evidence of the universality of sin.

***Responsibility and repentance are the beginning of reformation.*** Sometimes folks who most claim biblical authority for their faith completely miss the biblical message that the problem is really universal. The problem always belongs to someone else. They fail to see themselves in the circle of universal sin that includes "us" as well as "them." Until we have recognized the totality of the problem, nothing important will change.

The US has a higher rate of criminal incarceration than any other country in the world. Do you feel safer knowing that the prisons are full? According to William Willimon, an FBI agent was being interviewed about the rise in bank robberies in California. He wondered why anyone would try to rob a bank. Almost no one gets away with it. Eighty per cent are caught, and the money is recovered. The total loss for one year was only \$120,000. The agent expressed the fear that most of us harbor: What if it happens when I am in the bank, and I become an innocent victim? Willimon added: "we lost over a billion in the Savings and Loan frauds, and none of those guys has gone to jail. Of course all of those guys wear business suits."

Paul never left his Jewish foundations to become a Christian. He cited Psalm 14 in his lesson to Roman Christians, "no one is righteous." He declared that "the whole world may be held accountable to God." The rediscovery of universal sin is the beginning of personal responsibility. Of course, you are not individually and personally responsible for the Spanish Inquisition, the Jewish Holocaust in Hitler's Germany, or the attack on the World Trade Center. Yet, every atrocity in human history has required the collaboration of active hatred with passive assent. I was in seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1963 when the President was shot dead on the street in Dallas. For weeks and years after the event, it dominated conversations. Who was to blame? How could it have been prevented? Where is God when the very foundations come loose on society? A friend shocked me one day when he declared, "We are responsible." He could not point to a single way that I had done something wrong for which I ought to take the blame and bear punishment, but he rightly noted that we share responsibility for the behavior of every child who grows up to become another Lee Harvey Oswald. Some twenty years later, a seminary classmate publicly acknowledged his personal connection to Oswald. They had been in high school together in New Orleans. He remembered the loner that no one seemed to notice and wondered if his community and church could have made a difference.

John Donne was right: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."