

## Breaking Through Sin

**First Epistle Lesson: Ephesians 5:8-14**

**Gospel Lesson: John 9: 1-25**

**Sermon Series: Breakthrough**

**Sermon: Breaking Through Sin**

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**We are in our final week of our Break Through Series and we will end our series on the topic, "Breaking Through Sin."**

And so the word of focus as you might have already guessed that I am inviting us to explore is the word **sin**.

And so depending on how a person may have grown up and their church experiences surrounding the topic of sin; the word in itself could cause some of us to feel anxious, disconnected, angry, remorseful, guilty and in some cases dejected.

Just to share a little bit about some of my experiences with the topic of sin; within churches I had occasionally attended in Brooklyn, NY growing up in my teenager years and then within my ministerial career beginning in my early twenties;

So I have experienced a vast amount of emotions when hearing the preacher talk about sin.

Most of my experiences have been uncomfortable or downright awful;

The sermon would consist of messages such as "you better get right with God or else you will not make it into heaven!"

Upon hearing this type of messaging, I remembered feeling confused back then on what I would need to do to get out of the metaphorical "doghouse" with God...

I never really did get the answer that I was searching for.

The emphasis in some of my church experiences on the believer backsliding were so intense, that I often wondered if there was a point to ever try and be better and do better.

**This theology** is what I carried within me when my now 16 year old daughter was diagnosed with her brain tumor; she is fine now btw...praise God

**This theology** is what I carried within me when my first marriage failed...

**This theology** is what I carried within me when I first accepted my call into the ministry...

**This theology** my friends was like a noose that got tighter and tighter around my neck and was not released until I heard the first sermon preached by our General Secretary of Discipleship Ministries Junius B. Dotson....at Saint Mark UMC in Wichita where he was the senior pastor at the time....

It was in his sermon that I heard God as not being the damning God of judgment, but the forgiving God that had unconditional love for all;

**Unconditional love** even if you had a divorce...

**Unconditional love**...even if you made poor choices in life....

**Unconditional love** period....

**And it was roughly after 6 months of listening to this consistent messaging of God's grace, love and forgiveness under Rev. Dotson's leadership that I decided to begin my ministerial journey at that church...**

In fact if it weren't for the constant reinforcement of love, grace and mercy in Rev. Dotson's messages, I am most certain that I would not be here before you today.....I would have felt too unworthy and ashamed to serve God and the community. And so I started off with my personal experience as it pertains to the word **sin**, to help illumine why the title of my sermon is framed in the manner that it is...

Because the spiritual "aha" moment that I have discovered over these recent years is that there needs to be a mental break through for a lot of us on this concept of sin.....

Because a lot of us tend to understand and hold the concept of sin very close to us so much so, that it becomes part of our everyday life and vernacular;

What I have noticed is that for many of us, it is relatively easy and almost natural for us to detect the critical aspect of others and ourselves; in fact I don't know about you, but sometimes I can be my own worst critic.

But then when it comes for humanity to grasp the concept of resurrection, forgiveness, compassion or an openness to see and focus on the positive aspect or the potential of a situation or individual as it pertains to sin; this becomes a little difficult for a lot of us. And you know I still don't know why that is.

Folks I can receive 15 compliments within the hour, but that one, not so kind remark.... depending on the day, the comment or offense could literally tear up my spirit....

sometimes for days, where I dwell on it, I stew on it, I internalize it....and so I am personally working on this within myself; understanding that critical and harmful comments will hurt, but it shouldn't take over all of the good that is also taking place around me.....

So I say all of this assuming that I am not alone in my struggles (can I get a virtual Amen)....and to highlight that this is why it is my personal thought that if you and I cannot learn to move pass this place of sin, to a place of forgiveness of either ourselves or the one who has offended us; I am afraid that it is not the sin itself that will destroy us; but it is the inability to move through the sin that is more of a threat to ourselves and the society as a collective whole...

And before I expand any further with my theological rationale, allow me to share a few definitions for the word sin that I am working from....

Sin is defined as per Merriam-Webster; (1)an offense against religious or moral law

(2) an action that is or is felt to be highly reprehensible

(3)an often serious shortcoming : FAULT

(4) a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God

Furthermore in church, you may have heard sin defined as an act that separates you and I from God.

In fact, we can see this separation play out in the story of Adam and Eve; once humanity disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit, they were "kicked out," of the garden; at least this is how I have heard this story preached and interpreted time and time again...

However, if one were to revisit the story of the woman getting ready to get stoned for adultery found in John 8; Jesus does not cast her away...he doesn't dwell on her sin, but instead **he forgives her...**

Not to mention the forgiveness theme is emphasized in the Old Testament where Joseph forgives his brothers who had sold him into slavery (Genesis 45:1-15);

Forgiveness is mentioned and even emphasized strongly with Jesus interactions with his disciples; 77 times not 7 times to be exact in Matthew 18:21-22, is what we are invited to consider forgiving, when a sin is done towards us....

And family there is even more evidence biblically where we hear our Lord emphasize, as it pertains to sin, in both the Old and New Testament that from God's standing; when you and I "sin," don't dwell on it but forgive and do better the next time....

And yet it is in my personal experience, that most of humanity including myself still is not quite there when it comes to the idea of sin...

Typically if someone does something wrong to us or to those whom we love, we want them to pay...and pay heavily....

Typically the idea of forgiving a sin that causes such anguish and turmoil to others, is viewed as letting the "sinner," off the hook....

And trust me family, I am not wagging my fingers at anyone, because so far I have been pretty blessed in that I haven't had anything done too harmful towards me or my family, comparatively speaking....

For I have read and ministered to people in my career who have had loved ones murdered or have had experiences that I honestly do not know if I would or could respond with forgiveness....

And now in light of what we are going through in this country right now, **I would not be honest** if I did not share that I am frustrated that people are dying in the hallways of hospitals or dying at home alone because of our government not having a handle on this COVID-19 pandemic crisis;

I am frustrated with hearing stories like in Harlem NY, a dozen of eggs is priced at \$4.99; and green peppers are priced at \$2.99 a pound; tomatoes at \$3.99 a pound and the list goes in and the prices keep rising.

Not to mention the financial ramifications on businesses, churches and families, brings emotions beyond frustrations within me, if I were to think about it too long....in fact last night for the first time, I literally broke down and cried; like ugly cried with all that is going on.

And so in all that I have said and what I have not said, but it is implied.....there are some sins.....some faults...some infractions that I am not certain how you or I could respond with forgiveness even once....let alone 77 times....

**And yet as we approach Holy Week, one of the most celebrated forgiveness texts that we will witness is Jesus prayer from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."**

And I do not know about you, but I see this as an incredibly gracious response;

**It's a response** that is counter-intuitive, **it is a response** that is counter-cultural;

**And so how all of this applies to the gospel this morning; the reason why I spent some time in this area of really fleshing out the complexities of sin and our missional charge of loving/forgiving others and perhaps even ourselves in spite of said sin; is that this same resistance to how you and I might approach and understand sin can be seen within our text.**

For we are presented with a story about a blind man from birth— and we are witnessing a culture's response to this man's blindness...

And so the immediate response from most of this community as to the reason why this man was blinded from birth is that he **must have committed** some sort of sin; or if he hadn't, his **parents must have**....

Making another connection; Steve and I watched the movie Signs this past week.

We have seen it before, but being home for days has a way of inviting a lot of us to revisit some movies doesn't it?

So the lead character Mel Gibson, played as a father and a former priest, who tragically lost his wife in an accident; he left with his brother and two small children; a daughter and a son.... and this entire family along with the world are under attack by an extra terrestrial entity...

So you see one of the ways our family has responded to this COVID-19 pandemic; is by watching scary movies that will freak us out even more!

But a good preacher can see theology in any and everything; especially films and in this particular story, the one thing that the film highlighted and emphasized a lot, was the son had severe asthma and often had his inhaler on hand.

In this case, like the blind man, this child's asthma could be seen as a major impediment, or a sin by definition number 3; the asthma was a serious shortcoming. So towards the end of the movie, the family is hiding downstairs in the cellar to keep from the attack, and lo and behold the son has an asthma attack and his inhaler is nowhere to be found.

Mel Gibson who has been struggling in his faith and stepped down from the ministry as a result because his wife died, went into pastoral/ parent mold and coached his son through his asthma attack and the son survived, but the family needed to get back upstairs and get the inhaler soon before another asthma attack started. They knew the boy would most likely not survive another one.

Suddenly an announcement over the radio came on that the attack was over; the family heads upstairs; the father lays the son down onto the couch and goes into another room to get the inhaler.

When he comes back out, this alien who comes out of nowhere, because I guess that what aliens do you know; is now holding his son and looming over him with his creepy long finger right under this boy's nostril; threatening to let out this poisonous gas directly into his nose that would kill him instantly.

The entity then releases this gas out of his finger... I know right... pretty far fetched but stay with me..... but the boy miraculously survives.

You see his son having asthma was initially viewed to be just a sickness or an ailment or a short-coming i.e sin...

However, typically a person with asthma; especially after having an asthma attack... his/her lungs would be partially/fully closed off.

This reality is what didn't allow the poisonous gas to get inside him;

This restored the father's faith as he realized that in life there are no coincidences.

What he saw as once just another ailment or sickness or short coming or sin; now he saw his son's asthma as a miracle!

And so although this is a fictional story, I don't know about you, but I have discovered a lot of things in my life where setbacks and shortcomings ended up being a miracle;

With my daughter with her brain tumor, my miracle was being on government assistance for the only time ever in my life, but had I not been, I would not have been able to afford the costly hospital bills for the four brain surgeries that would be needed to make her well.

**And so I share all of this to suggest, do you see how embedded this idea of sin is within humanity; that the only response to sin has to be some sort of punishment or life sentence of agony?**

**Meanwhile, getting back to our gospel; Jesus uses this man as a teaching moment to the disciples and the world to essentially say as I put it into my own words.....Enough!**

“Neither he nor his parents are the reason why this man is blind.....,”

In fact in my theological mind Jesus was saying; in fact, his physical blindness is not a curse ; his physical blindness is not a sin.

As a side note; it is my experience of ministering with people who are physically blind; that they are more adept and more wise and more in tune with who they are and their capabilities than those of us who can see;

So to suggest that because someone being blind is because of them being a sinner or their parents being a sinner is a sin in my books....

For me in this passage, ableism is the only sin that I see...not this blind man.....

**And so getting back to the gospel, Jesus goes further in vs. 3 as I continue to put it into my own words, saying “neither he nor his parents are the reason why he is blind. In fact it is in his blindness that I am going to expand all of your minds to a place where you will discover an ultimate breakthrough.**

**It is in his blindness** that you will hopefully discover that my plan is like in Jeremiah 29:11 to prosper this man and give him a bright future;

**It is in his blindness** that I am going to teach all of you that **I can still use him and will use him** to be the catalyst for my mission!

Showing the disciples and the world that **there is no perceived infraction** cannot be used for the glory of God; **there is no sin that cannot be turned around** for those whose intentions are to love and serve God.....

**God will and can work through anything that you and I may consider to be a deficiency...**

**God will work through** our perceived mistakes...

**God will work through** our perceived ailments...

**God will work through** our perceived failures and weaknesses and shortcomings and sins...

God will highlight the Divine’s light working through each of these situations and reveal the Glory!

**And so you see family, there was a mindset that Jesus was addressing on that day with that blind man.....**

To let the disciples and all of us know that ***all things truly do work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to God’s purpose.***

***And since you and I were created in the image of God and we are all God’s family, then guess what... we are God’s purpose!***

Looking at our first lesson out of Ephesians to help me to bring this message home; it implicitly reiterates what I have been preaching;

My takeaway from this lesson is that if you and I cannot learn how to work through this concept of sin, we will remain in darkness.

Because what I have learned over life is that you and I will inevitably make some mistakes and some of them are going to be real doozies.

But as I have preached time and time again, is that the way that we get through this darkness is by being able to learn how to move forward in our life dance that will consist of failures and mistakes and grow from them.

Sort of like going back to that 77 times not 7 scripture; I purposefully only mentioned Matthew's interpretation of Jesus words and held Luke's interpretation for now....

Because according to Luke, he agreed with Matthew in that Jesus did tell them to forgive 77 times not 7; but he added the caveat in Luke 17:3; if there is repentance you must forgive....

How I see this is that when it comes to sin, what God is more interested in is our intentionality to do better the next time;

For it's not how we fall, but how we get back up that ultimately matters in our faith walk journey known as life....

So God as I see it, is more interested in our intentionality to grow in God's light and love daily, but the reality is that you and I will stay in darkness **if we can't get past** the infraction;

You and I will get stuck in darkness, **if we cannot get past the sin whether we caused it or if it was done towards us....**

**For life is like a story with many chapters;**

And the hard lessons, mistakes, wrongdoings and shortcomings are only a piece of our narrative; but it is not the entire story of we don't want it to be; the story friends goes on....

And the good news is that within our own personal narratives, there is an opportunity for a breakthrough; there is even a personal invitation for a breakthrough, where you and I will be met with an opportunity of light; in fact, I would say that the light has never gone away...it is just a bit foggy right now...but the light is still there...

But just like a book, we must learn how to keep turning those pages so that we can get to that chapter where the light is in its full glory again....

**And so friends this is how I plan to proceed in our own collective darkness right now that the entire world is experiencing in the midst of this pandemic crisis;**

I plan to lead with intentionality, trusting that the light is still here, for the light is within all of us....

This pandemic crisis in my eyes is a chapter within a larger narrative, but my soul yearns and will not rest until we are able to see the light in its full glory again...and I know we will....

For other countries are getting through this and putting the pieces back together again and **so will we...**

For in the light as Ephesians states we will see fruit again and we are seeing glimmers of that fruit already...

For there are many deaths, but there are people recovering...

You and I are seeing fruit in that in hard times like these, there are also people stepping up and producing fruit that is yielding goodness that is life-giving....

And so the biggest revelation that I leave with you. is that how we break through whatever sin we may be wrestling with is we make a commitment to keep moving forward;

No matter how many setbacks we may experience;

In spite of the anger, frustration, regrets or remorse we may be justifiably feeling and experience as a result;

We should definitely give ourselves space to feel those emotions, but then there will be a time where we ought to strive to let them go;

Because we realize that we are still in a narrative that is meant to move forward;

We are in a tough chapter, but the good news is that there are many more chapters to come;  
And the hope is that our mindset will allow ourselves to be able to be like the man in our gospel;  
That when Jesus' love and light metaphorically touches our eyes with the mud; the mud that represents all of our perceived setbacks and failures and infractions and shortcomings that we may have caused along with the transgressions that were also done to us; when Jesus touches our eyes, the invitation is that you and I... that we all go to our own personal Siloam, to wash our faces; so that we will be able to see that the light again.... and looking back as our narrative plays on, the hope is that we will remember that the light was always there.....

Peace and Love,

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