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Romans 1:1-5,16-23; 5:6-19  
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Welcome to the beginning of Lent. Like Advent, Lent is a holiday of expectation and darkness before the light. In Advent, Jesus's life was threatened by King Herod and in Lent, Jesus's life will be threatened and taken by the Roman Governor Poncius Piolet in Jerusalem. And like Advent asked questions about what kind of Messiah Jesus will be, Lent will ask the questions about what Jesus's death on a Roman cross means.

The other elephant in the room that Lent brings up is this whole idea of humankind's sinfulness. You heard it and probably cringed at the first reading of Romans, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness and so God gave them up to the cosmic power of sin and a dimmed mind." And I am sure many of you have heard about original sin from the story of Adam and Eve. And I am sure that at times people have beaten you over the head with this idea that you are sinful. But I want to open up this scripture to a new interpretation, not about the sinfulness of humankind, but of the great reversal that is found in Christ.

Please pray with me. "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you, our rock and our redeemer.

We are all in this together

Romans says, All people are sentenced to death because they sinned in Adam and that God has given us up to the power of sin and death.

I took a class on the book of Romans in my final semester of seminary. And written in my notes on today's passage are the words, "think seriously how to preach this passage." And what makes it so difficult is the history of how this text has been used to throughout the ages to argue for everything from anti-semitism to original sin, which is the idea that humans are hopelessly sinful by default. And I could spend a whole sermon talking about what exactly original sin is. About how Augustine said that our moral compasses are curved away from God, so we cannot be good even if we wanted to be. But I'm sure that talk of our sinful human nature will not spark joy in you and may not even be what this text is trying to get it.

Let me give you an example from my experience. From when I was a child to high school I loved going to church camp. For the most part I went to a Mennonite Church camp in southern Michigan called, Camp Fridenswauld. But one year, I wanted to get twice the camp in so I decided that I would go to a second camp that one of my friends went to. And this went well for the most part. I made some good friends and the camp preacher was pretty cool. I had such a good time that I

decided that going to camp twice a year was just not good enough and so I signed up to go on a Spring Break mission trip with the second camp. And this is the point in the story that I let you all know that this was an evangelical christian camp. And thus I spent my spring break trying to convince people that they were sinful and needed Jesus or they would go to hell. Most of the time we were using the ten commandments, cause like, that list includes lying and God knows we're all guilty of that. But the fundamental assumption is this. Human beings are sinful and the point of evangelism is to convince them that they are sinful and only going to church can fix them. And I even if the people we were "evangelizing" did not admit to any sins, it didn't matter, because people without Jesus are seen as broken. As incomplete and containing intrinsic sin.

Are we are all in this together?

And to be honest, I find that whole strategy manipulative and disgusting. But not just me. This idea that the church (is the owner of Jesus) and has a scarce resource of grace that it only gives to those who "deserve it " is a very effective method of controlling people. It's also a form of bigotry since it looks at every other religion as worthless, because they do not provide the cure to the invented illness of original sin.

So what are we to do with all this talk about Adam bringing death to all people. Well. That is, unsurprisingly a much more complex issue than the simplified original sin legacy. It's complicated because we do not live in Paul's world and so much of this text is dependent upon deep cultural understandings.

So there are two Jewish ideas of sin that are at war in this passage. Both understandings see sin as a capital S "Sin" it is a personified entity, you could think of it as Satan, but Paul would prefer the words "powers and principalities" which are powers both spiritual and political. They are systems of death. They are the Roman Governor who ordered a Jewish peasant to be beaten to death for accidentally bumping into his horse. They are systems where slave labor destroyed the economic viability of family agriculture in Roman Italy, thus forcing farmers off their land and into the city of Rome to beg for food. The powers and principalities are alive today in systems where profit is more important than people's lives. Systems where the war is seen as an easy solution to any disagreement between nations. Systems of imprisonment that statistically affect particular people of color and people immigrating from Central America more than others.

We are all in these systems of sin together

But the ancient debate is about what causes these systems. One is pretty easy to understand, it is the effects of Adam's trespass. This idea is basically the idea that human wrongdoing is the cause of sin and death. And that the law is meant to correct sin by making it clear that sin has consequences. But what does Adam's sinfulness have to do with "all people"? Well from the research that I did, my best guess is Adam is a stand-in for the Jewish people. In the first century Adam was portrayed as circumcised at birth, a high priest, and the first patriarch buried alongside Abraham. But maybe the point is that Adam is a representative of the pattern within humanity to break the law, whatever that law may be. Or maybe the condemnation of Adam for disobedience is the cause of sin that Paul disagrees with and thus is just a starting place from which Jesus reverses.

The other side of the debate is represented by Jesus. Jesus offers a new way out of the problem of sin. This way does not depend upon our actions, for we know we will slip up and my highschool evangelical missionary self will certainly pin me with breaking some ancient law. Instead of sin and death having sway over our lives, instead grace and the gift of righteousness will reign. And if that sounds like complete gibberish then let me break it down for you.

Grace is the reversal of Sin. One way to think about this is through forgiveness. But then again, this idea of forgiveness pre-supposes that Sin is a personal transgression, which is not totally how Paul saw it. So I prefer to think of Grace as

God taking over humanity and claiming us for God's self. For it does not say that humans chose anything. Instead it says that "through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous." I don't know about you, but I don't think I have to first become perfect before God applies Grace to me. Instead, Grace is applied to all of humanity on mass, without asking if we are ever worthy of this Grace. Because it's not about worthiness.

Grace is the Good News that we are not in this fight alone. For Christ is in solidarity with us. We are not thrown to the whims of oppressive governments that will never fail, for surely I tell you all nations and governments fall eventually. We are not thrown to the powers of Sin and Death without any hope like is described in Romans 1. Instead, Jesus is the reversal of all of that.

And more so, it is a maybe not so subtle nod from Paul that this whole idea of humans being responsible for solving the issue of Sin does not explain everything. As the Christian Mystics say, God is the more, is the thing beyond our capacity to hope, is the more beyond all other claims to power. God is the more beyond every religion, every idea about God, Because God cannot be put in a box. And so,

We, along with Jesus, are all in this together

But perhaps the most profound thing about rejecting the idea of original sin has to do with our Anabaptist history, because back in the day, the whole idea of infant baptism depends on the idea that baptism washes us of original sin, but Anabaptists rejected this idea of original sin, saying that children were clean from sin and it was only the sin of an adult that matters. Now, Paul may take issue with this idea that sin is a thing that we personally do, but the Anabaptist practice of adult baptism is a profound affirmation of the purity of the human's soul that it is perfectly fine upon arrival. And even more so, if it matters that adults choose baptism, then ability to choose God.

Because God is with us. And we are all in God together.