

**Sermon—January 6, 2013**  
**Rev. Laura Hehner**

Sometimes we get real caught up, in our heads, don't we?

Something happens out here, and all of it just swirls up, and catches us for a moment.

...For just a fragment of time, pulling apart all of the tiny pieces of who we think we are,  
and just jumbling them around a bit to where we become unsure of ourselves and where  
we stand.

I was driving down Rim Rock Rd, the other day,

and I saw this small little spiraling vortex of wind drop down in front of my car,

---Just in front of that house down there on the corner---

lifting the snow from its settled place on the ground, and carrying it up into itself.

I stopped for a second and watched that wind

pick up all of those little glimmering specks of white, tossing and mixing them into the  
air,

before the whirlwind just vanished—dissipated---only a moment later...

...leaving all of that snow freshly scattered, a slight ways

from where it was lying still and solid, just a minute before.

...And I realized, that's what life does with our minds, and our sense of self, sometimes,  
isn't it?

Certain moments pick us up from one place—one state of being---

---mixes around all of the small parts that once stacked us up firm,

then drops us off, just a little ways from where we were---a little bit reorganized.

---Still ourselves, but somewhere else, to come back together,

freshly restructured, into something solid again.

It's that process of changing and *learning* while we get swept up into each new moment God sets in front of our eyes.

We restructure and reorganize within ourselves as we live each day, and we learn new things about being alive.

...And how do we learn?

Most times, by asking *questions*, right?

Because if we don't ask a question, than we either *already* know the answer, or we're too scared to admit we don't *yet* know the answer, isn't that the case?

So we learn by asking questions...

...We become more certain *because* we are *uncertain*....

...All things existing in a balance.

No light without darkness, no truth without lies.

For every action there is an equal but opposite reaction.

Alright---so---don't worry!

This is all going to settle into something that makes sense again. (hopefully!)

I know this intro was sort of a whirlwind itself,

but here's where it falls back down and comes back together.

Where all of that scrambled up stuff relates back to God, back to ourselves,  
and how we are with each other in God's spirit.

Today we're gonna go a little into that part of our spiritual journey  
regarding this process of trial and error which helps us grow and develop.

Regarding all of those moments of *wrongdoing*  
that eventually help us move closer *right action*,

Through each of those learning times when we wisp up into confusion,  
asking all sorts of questions, then settle back down.

Now, I really don't like this part of being a preacher,  
because a lot of these things we talk about together, I'm no pro at doing myself;  
But it's my job to *talk* about it, and God, for whatever reason,  
set me up to be embarrassed in front of a group of people this way on a regular basis,  
so that we can all think about this stuff together and grow together.

A lot of you very kind friends *know* the ways  
I'm very much far from right action sometimes, myself;  
so please just bear with me as we work through all of this as a group.

That being said, we're gonna go a little deeper into what we mentioned  
during our advent sermon series on Oh Holy Night...

... about this way we tend to “pine” over our sins.

Remember the verse?

“Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘til he appeared and the soul felt its worth...”

Well, we’re going to talk about that today for a while.

We’re gonna sit with the idea of “sin” for a little while.

I don’t like even saying the word. It’s got so much hate-language attached to it.

So much mishandling. So much ulterior-motive and guilt-pushing tied to it.

I think I said this before when we talked about the concept of “evil” last year, right around this time...

But people have sinfully used the word sin too many times. Kinda ironic, right?

Anyway... I don’t like the word... but it’s an important topic...

And I thought this would be a good thing for us to think about together in our time with God, today,

Because it is the New Year, after all...

And wow. There’s really never a time we’re harder on ourselves, than this time, right now.

Never a time in the year when we examine ourselves so much, and look at all of the millions of rights and wrongs in our lives, and think about all of the ways we’ve failed and succeeded in living into the right, more than the wrong, is there?

All of us go from this just massive, joyful consumption  
of all of these foods we're normally way too sensible to touch---  
---the cookies, the pastries, the eggnog, the sugar glazed ham----  
(all of it just dribbling from our chins!)  
---into this raging guilt fest of *horror* over what we just put in our bodies,  
...and the shape our legs and buns and guts, and chins, are left in, after we're through.

Past all of this, during this time of year, we start looking at our more *regular* vices.

---Of which most of us have *many*. At least I know I do.

Those things we normally do in the off-season, that make us happy,

but aren't exactly the healthiest parts of our lives.

And we even examine the relationships we have with each other;

And ways we think we might want to change for the better through these new months  
coming up.

It's a whirlwind time.

A time when all of our pieces get swept up and moved around, right in front of our eyes.

A time we get caught up in ourselves this way, as we move toward change...

... and as we hope to resettle and come back together whole, still as ourselves,

but a little differently situated, somewhere ahead of where we were before.

It is a time of *atonement*, when you think about it.

Just like in the Days of Awe in the Jewish Calendar, from Roshashana

(the Jewish New Year) to Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement),

It becomes for us, too, a time of reflection.

A time of considering our *sins*, when you think about it.

Strange but true.

This is a time of *questioning*---not knowing---and so it's a time of *finding*, and *learning*.

Alright--- so---all of this being the case, in talking about sin,

it would be good to talk about what it actually is.

What it means, in the biblical sense.

Past all of the stuff we mistakenly attach to it through culture,

And random social mores combined into weird---a lot of times *corrupt*---social agendas.

So what *is* sin? That's the question we'll meditate on today...

Not *which actions* are sins... because, in most cases, that changes from moment to moment.

From situation to situation. From person to person.

Answers to ethical questions depend on circumstance, intentions,

and potential outcomes, all tied together...

... more than they do on the individual details considered apart from the whole.

Does that make sense?

For the sake of not getting too dark in today's sermon,

I'll use a lighter example that can also be applied to more severe circumstances...

As an example:

... Is it a sin to risk hurting someone's feelings by telling them the truth

that they're starting to look unhealthy and out of shape,

after all of that glazed ham and eggnog,

thus subtly urging them to consider going back to the gym and cutting back on the food?

Or is it a sin to preserve their feelings and pretend nothing's wrong,

while pouring them another glass and passing the plate,

knowing you're only contributing to their problem?

Are both sins? Are neither sins? Are each a little bit of both?

These are *ethical* questions. Which change from circumstance to circumstance.

---The answers not dependent on the eggnog alone or the ham alone,

or whether you use soft words or hard words---

---but on the overall intention and outcome, each entwined together,

and unique to every moment.

We're all put to very specific and individual tests, challenges and questions,

in each minute of our lives.

And I believe there is no uniform spreadsheet of answers that God---the teacher---uses for all.

Jesus' ministry is a perfect example of this.

So many times he redefined our traditional understandings of sin,

showing the variations of right and wrong in different circumstances.

Look at our reading from John chapter 5, verses 6-12...

John 5: 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" 7 The sick man answered him, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me." 8 Jesus said to him, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." 9 At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk. Now that day was a sabbath. 10 So the Jewish men said to the man who had been cured, "It is the sabbath; it is not lawful for you to carry your mat." 11 But he answered them, "The man who made me well said to me, 'Take up your mat and walk.'" 12 They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Take it up and walk?'"

The boundaries between sin and righteousness are blurred, here.

The Pharisees are honing in on the healed man's supposed sin on the Sabbath day.

And they want to go after Jesus, too, once they find out it was him who healed the man.

Because he, also, was "working" on the Sabbath.

In this passage, what is traditionally sin... walking with your mat,

and healing people on the Sabbath,

...have become righteousness, and righteousness has become sin.

The same lesson goes for our reading in Matthew 26.

--The woman with the oil, and the disciples feeling

she'd sinned in wasting what could've been given to the poor.

And Jesus once again shedding new light by looking closer—deeper---

---at intention and outcome, rather than the simple act, itself.

Moments like these are scattered all over the gospels.

I basically just had to open the book and point in to find each of these examples.

Jesus not only hung out with sinners, but Jesus was, himself, one of the *greatest* of sinners

-----a *blasphemer*--- to the religious authority of his time.

Very interesting to think about.

He turned things around; and his life and ministry,  
remind us that deciding on which actions are sinful  
and which actions are not, is very, very complicated....

...And this is one of the reasons I believe the New Testament teaches us  
that judgment over those matters---

--when we look out from behind our eyes, into the eyes of another.

When we look at the actions and deeds of someone *else*----

---is left up to God, who knows better...

... Not up to us.

... So we're not going to come up with a list of what actions are sins. That would be silly.

Most things would be on and off the list at once.

But in this season of change...

In this season of our lives moving from one place to another.

Being picked up and scrambled around, and rearranged...

... we *can* talk about the *definition* of sin, itself.

What's meant by this word, which has been so misused and abused?

A word which can be applied a lot of different times, in a lot of different circumstances,

Often in surprising ways.

We've talked in the past---specifically during our discussion about evil---

---that our sins are simply the mistakes we make.

Ways we slip up. Simple as that. And these mistakes run the gamut.

But the worst part of them is the fact that they act

to create a sense of separation between us and God.

And as a result, they create a distance between each other.

But we'll go further today in talking about what's meant in the actual word itself,

which goes right along with this idea but gives it a little more imagery.

A little more creativity than I gave the topic, myself.

The Greek word for Sin is derived from the root word *hamartano*,

which historically was an archer's term, meaning to "miss the mark."

In this sense, our sins—our mistakes---

Don't come as some kind of earthshaking,

unredeemable act that will never be lifted from our souls.

...But as a moment that we see a goal in front of us.

Whatever goal you'd like to imagine.

Insert in any of your hopes for these new months of your life.

But in the Christian sense and biblical, it's this goal

of actively loving God and living in God.

The goal of being a good person. Doing ok in the world. Right in the world by others.

Our eyes and hearts fixing there in the center of that goal,

with a desire to love the way we've been loved ourselves.

Or maybe better than we've been loved.

We settle our eyes tight on this specific path for our movements to follow.

We focus in on it. Hope for it.

We pull our arm back,

And woosh! ...We watch. ...We wait.

And---NOooo! We didn't even come close! In fact, all of that movement we just made---

----BLAM!

Leads into our arrow whacking into the *side* of the target,

and bouncing right out into the field!

We slap our heads, and look at what we've just done. Realizing.

Wow. I um... I didn't even come *close* to what I was hoping for!

How many times have you felt that?

Just the other night, I was playing darts at my parents' house on Christmas.

Convenient example, but sadly true.

I'm normally pretty good at it; but I hadn't played in a while

and we'd all had a little too much eggnog... so at first... embarrassingly enough...

...all *three* of my darts---they didn't hit the center of the bullseye.

Didn't hit a spot anywhere near a nice bulk of points to subtract;

but all three of them, smacked the wood all *around* the dartboard,

And ricocheted right off into the carpet.

Didn't even come close. My cheeks flushed.

I turned around, and I said to my brothers... don't worry...

I was just calibrating.

And, the root of this greek word for sin suddenly makes so much more sense.

It speaks and breathes the truth of the gospels,  
and turns up the volume on what Jesus said to people  
about God's love always being with us.

And this idea of forgiveness and growth as we go.

When that archer's arrow hits outside its target, those are those moments we screw up.

We'd hoped to do better, but we just missed the mark.

We couldn't do it. We didn't get it exactly right.

We said something wrong. Hurtful. We did something calloused. Cold.

That's when we accidentally hit in the rings just out from the center.

The worse the action, the further out from the goal, sometimes missing the rings  
entirely...

... like me with those first shots at the dartboard.

But that statement I made about the calibrating, to my brothers.

It was actually pretty accurate.

And this is other part of the definition of sin that I love.

(sounds kind of strange to say that, but oh well)

By missing the goal, I was able to know better how to move my hands  
and point my aim for the next throw.

I realized I was going in too hard.

That I had thrown with too much of an arch.

And that I hadn't given myself the time to focus  
that I'd need to hit that goal in front of me.

I'd underestimated the difficulty and fine tuning needed to do it right.

So I focused harder. I changed my lob to a toss, and set the line of movement straighter.

And... bingo.

Wasn't a bullseye. But it was definitely a lot closer.

Took some nice points off my score with all three of those next tosses.

And that's what we do in our lives.

That's what we do with sin.

We screw up. We make mistakes.

Over and over and over again.

Usually with a hope for living as a good person between all of these imperfect moments.

But as long as we pay attention to what we're doing.

As long as we don't pine over the fact that we missed.

Dwell over our lost target, and give up on continuing to try,

out of frustration, or anger, or embarrassment...

And we keep going, keeping our eyes on God,

And keeping our hearts beating in God's love

with a want to spread that love outside of ourselves...

...Each one of those times we miss, show us how to get closer.

In mistakenly doing it wrong, we learn to better do it right.

And we feel the love of God and the truth of God's forgiveness

more powerfully with each new turn we're given.

...With each kinder word we have a chance to share after we noticed the last ones caused hurt.

With each gentler way of moving our hands, we have,  
 to give somebody just the slightest sense of hope rather than hate,  
 We come closer to reaching that goal we hope for in our hearts.  
 --To hit that goal of living more fully in the life of God,  
 and helping that life---that sense of rejuvenation from the soul of God---  
 ---swell into someone else's soul, in need of lifting.

As we close up today and walk back out of here  
 with all of our hopes for what we might grow into later,  
 Let's try, as a group of people gathered together in God,  
 not to get too caught up when we miss the mark.

When those learning moments come,  
 When that unexpected whirlwind picks us up  
 and scatters around all of those little things we thought we knew about ourselves,  
 Let's let peace come over us knowing that we'll soon freshly resettle, and restructure  
 As we move into the next place.

And from there, let's keep going. Letting our eyes stay with God as we go.

In this time of atonement, as we learn, and change, and grow,  
 and we look at each of our arrows... the ways we've hit the target and missed,

Let's remember those words from Ecclesiastes:

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: 2 a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; 3 a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; 4 a time to weep,

and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; 6 a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to throw away; 7 a time to tear, and a time to sew; 10 I have seen the business that God has given to everyone to be busy with. 11 He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, 12 I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; God has done this, so that all should stand in awe before him.

Whatever your life looks like today... wherever you find yourself standing today...this is the day the Lord has made, so let's rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.