

In Him There Is No Sin  
(or The Dance of Humanity)  
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**Acts 3:12-19**

<sup>12</sup>When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, ‘You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? <sup>13</sup>The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. <sup>14</sup>But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, <sup>15</sup>and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. <sup>16</sup>And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you.

<sup>17</sup> ‘And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. <sup>18</sup>In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. <sup>19</sup>Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.

**1 John 3:1-7**

<sup>1</sup>See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup>And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

<sup>4</sup> Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup>You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

I have to be honest. This reading from 1 John makes me feel like a failure. I know that I sin, and with great frequency and a skill level which only comes with much experience. Does this mean I cannot really be abiding in Christ, as the author suggests when he writes “No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him”? I don’t think so. I certainly don’t feel that way. I know that what drives me to be better – to love better, to forgive better, to let go of judgment better – is entirely out of my seeking to follow Christ.

So is there a middle ground, somewhere in between? Ancestors of our faith and modern-day theologians both suggest so. Martin Luther, before he came to believe we are justified by grace through faith, was known to go to confession many times a day. He felt the unbearable burden of sin and so went

seeking absolution but then sinned again and was crushed again by the weight of his sinfulness. He was relieved from this great sorrow once he came to understand *sola gratia, sola fide* – by grace alone, through faith alone. His sinfulness was no less present but he acknowledged that Christ came exactly for the forgiveness of those same sins. In place of the sorrow about himself he turned his focus to hope in Christ.

In a related way, a Lutheran pastor in Denver, Nadia Bolz-Weber, has begun a church named House for All Sinners and Saints. This moniker is not suggesting that both sinners and saints are welcome there but that it is a house for all, each of us both sinner and saint. Therein is grace, indeed. The epistle known as 1 John, as a whole, declares this, too. Today we read in 1 John 1 that “No one who abides in him sins.” If we were to turn back to 1 John 1, we would read “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>1</sup> We might want to ask the author, “Now which is it?” Our answer would come a little further along: “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”<sup>2</sup> and “if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”<sup>3</sup>

In fact, we all do sin, even the earliest believers, including those to whom our author wrote. Most weeks I sit in a Starbucks near my home as I work to bring together our readings for the week with the weeks we have each lived. As I look around at the people doing homework and planning meetings and catching up in the midst of their weeks and seeking solitude in a way that does not leave them alone, I sense a palpable camaraderie of sinners and saints, no one so perfect as to radiate a heavenly glow, nor none so base as to send off vibes of hatred. This cross-section of God’s children is gathered wherever we might be, from church to prison, from school to home, from work to hospital. And today we read, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.”

“What we know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is... You know that he was revealed to take away sins; and in him there is no sin.” Our world, our lives are so much like the letter of 1 John: not either/or but both/and. “When he is revealed” and “he was revealed.” “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves” and “No one who abides in him sins.” The message of God and the living of God’s people are not so simple. We are ever dancing between who we are and who we hope to be, what we will be which has not yet been revealed. Professor David L. Bartlett describes this dance by saying, “[We] can imperfectly imitate the Christ whom one day [we]

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:8.

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 1:9.

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:1.

will know perfectly. [We] can embody the hope that [we] profess: ‘And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.’”<sup>4</sup>

This language of “in him” is not even so straightforward. We trust and believe that, when we read “in *him* there is no sin,” we are affirming the perfection of Jesus with the author of the letter to the Hebrews, who wrote, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Another layer to our reading comes when we affirm “*in him* there is no sin.” Our assurance of forgiveness includes these words: “anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.” Now, I have the privilege of saying these words each week, and I say them with trust in the words. Do I feel like a new creation? Not usually. Again, I do not believe this means I am not “in Christ.” As Professor Bartlett described, I understand myself to be embodying the hope of what I profess when I say “Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.”

Giving momentum to that dance between who we are and who we hope to be is the act of repentance, a following of the instruction in Acts to “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.” Giving momentum to that dance is the acknowledgment of not being “in him” and our efforts to right that, our efforts to come to a place where we can say that we are in him and in us there is no longer sin. There is a comforting resonance in the words of Professor Ronald Cole-Turner, who described the reality which precedes our acknowledgment. He writes “We are odd, and we smooth over our oddities at our peril. When we feel right at home here, we should wonder whether we have traded the joy of divine love for the comfort of social acceptance.”<sup>5</sup>

Surely we know from the gospels that, for the one in whom there was no sin, there was also no comfort of social acceptance. Being “in him” does not equal comfort, much to our chagrin and far from that which we crave. Who we hope to be are a people courageous enough and satisfied with divine love so that we might not seek the comfort of social acceptance. This “Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out” is not so simple but it is also not impossible. If Peter, who denied Christ three times, and misunderstood him innumerable more, can be one to whom we look in following Christ, then we, too, as a mix of who we are and who we hope to be, can imitate imperfectly the Christ whom one day – one day – we will know perfectly. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Loving God, as we dance between this world and yours, be with us and give us courage to ever be heading toward you, we pray. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 423.

<sup>5</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 2*, p. 418.