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Striving for Goodness and “Missing the Mark”

Jeff Wells

God cannot compel us to be good and not sin, but God beckons us in every moment toward goodness, beauty, compassion, and love.

Reading: Psalm 32:1-8, 11 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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For our new worship series for Lent, the Worship Vision Team decided to take on the challenging topic of *sin*. That’s something, I admit, we have avoided talking about much in worship at the Church of the Village. Instead, we have used words or phrases that are easier to digest, like “falling short” or “missing the mark.” The concept of “sin,” along with the presumed consequences of sin, have so often been used to shame, control, condemn, punish, and exclude people. But avoiding the word doesn’t negate its reality. It affects us personally, institutionally, and systemically. So, in this series, we want to explore, gently and lovingly, the reality of sin through the lenses of ethics, grace, repentance, and love.

Today, I want to offer an alternative to the classical Christian doctrine of “original sin.” I will share why I think process-relational theology can help us reclaim the theological category of “sin” as a valuable part of our theology and our way of being in the world.

I don’t have time to explore the complicated evolution of the doctrine of “original sin,” but I do highly recommend the thorough and fascinating Wikipedia article on the subject. I *know* there are some of you out there who want to sink your teeth into the tasty topic of “hamartiology”—that’s the churchy and academic term for the branch of Christian theology that studies sin.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was the first Christian theologian to offer a robust conception of “original sin.” He taught that the sin of Adam and Eve (although the focus is on Adam) was based on harmful desire and that sin is passed on to every human being at birth, not merely by example. Initially, Augustine believed sin was part of our very nature and this inheritance left our ability to choose good severely weakened.

The majority of mainline Christians and others now view the Adam and Eve story as a mythological tale created to explain human behavior and humanity’s relationship with God. I suspect that no one in worship today believes that human infants are sinful by nature. Yet, it seems pretty clear that we are surrounded by sin and that none of us escape it. So, how can we understand how sin continues to infuse human behavior? How should we try to deal with it or live with it?

The impulse to sin is something we learn because we are born into and are inextricably connected to families, communities, organizations, and broader social systems which both exhibit *and teach*—explicitly or implicitly—the whole spectrum of behaviors from evil to goodness and self-giving. And it’s not a binary. None of us are perfectly righteous or completely sinful. We are a mix of behaviors that span the spectrum. Just as we learn to be selfish, to harm ourselves and one another, we also have the capacity to learn to do good, to act out of love.

I suspect most Christians still view sin as primarily a personal, individual problem. It doesn’t help that so much talk about sin focuses on sexual sin in particular while ignoring or downplaying widespread sins like greed, the perpetuation of poverty and homelessness, gross economic inequity, white supremacy, exploitation, destruction of ecological systems and living species, and so on. We may realize that the ways our political, economic, educational, and religious institutions contribute to grave harm done to people and the planet, yet our impulse remains to see sin in our society as the result of individual, personal failures. Theologian, Marjorie Suchocki, who I had the chance to meet at the Process Studies conference two weeks ago, says, “the individualization of sin is the trivialization of sin” (“[Original Sin Revisited](#),” *Process Studies* Vol. 20, Number 4, Winter, 1991).

The truth is that we are caught up in systemic sin and we are impelled to be willing or unwilling participants. So, whether we call it “original” or not, we need an understanding of sin that accounts for our collective human condition. Sin is a social phenomenon in the sense that “each individual sin is only properly understood in relation to the backdrop of sin evidenced by [humanity] as a whole” (Suchocki, “[Original Sin Revisited](#)”).

Of course, individual human beings engage in harmful, unethical, and immoral behavior and we do bear individual responsibility. Yet, those acts do not arise separately from our social milieu. Individual sin is in a dialectical relationship with the sinful policies, practices, norms, and mores propagated by collective structures and systems that provide the soil for them. The individual and the corporate reinforce one another. When we act against someone else’s good, we act against our own good as well. In other words, we are all connected.

Process theology aids our understanding of this reality because it helps us to recognize that God is not all-powerful, yet is *very powerful*—always loving and always luring and inspiring us.

“Sin” is the word that names the ways we fail, collectively and individually, to listen to God leading.

God does not merely lure each of us individually and separately. God lures all human beings and every element in the universe toward the greatest good, toward love, truth, and beauty. God’s desire is to lead all toward the greatest good for all. Sin gets in the way of God’s desire and often in the way of our own best interests.

Therefore, God takes into account each of our individual desires, passions, abilities and weaknesses, and all of our past experiences, as well as the harmful ways we may have been shaped, and abuse and traumas we may have suffered. God also sees all of the ways human beings—especially those with the most power and resources, collude with one another to build and prop up sinful social systems. With all of that knowledge and with God’s infinite wisdom, God works in us, individually and collectively, to move us toward the good—toward the best possible outcomes for all.

The expressions of human sin that do the most widespread harm are those that arise from human systems of domination and control that benefit relatively few human beings. As human civilizations became larger and ever more technically advanced, the capacity to exploit and do harm also increased exponentially. That has led us to a situation in which humanity is now on the brink of potentially causing the extinction of our own species and threatening the ability of the ecosphere to sustain any life on Earth.

It doesn’t have to go this way. Such social sin is not inevitable. There are really bright people around who know how to run an economy that does not depend on the control of giant corporations and the enrichment of a handful of billionaires. There are lots of people who know how to create regional agricultural systems that do not destroy the soil or kill off birds and pollinating insects. We have a pretty good idea of what needs to be done. As scholar activist, Heather McGee, has written about confronting racism, to the extent white people can learn to work with people of color, we will all reap huge “solidarity dividends” that will benefit everyone.

There are shining examples of the way forward. Millions of individuals and thousands of organizations are working in a myriad of ways to confront the ecological crisis and transform the ways human societies interact with the Earth and its living systems. The nation of Bhutan has rejected “Gross Domestic Product—GDP”—in other words, ever-increasing consumption and accumulation of wealth—as the measure of its “progress.” Instead, it used the Gross National Happiness Index to guide its policies around economic and social development and ecological sustainability. There are now Gross National Happiness centers in Thailand and Spain, as well.

God cannot compel us to be good and not sin. God’s power is expressed through love and a longing for the common good. Perhaps we can never completely overcome our human tendency to sin, but we surely will not diminish the harm we do to ourselves, one another, and the world without God’s luring and also without collective effort and acting in mutual solidarity and love.

We know that we humans have the capacity to act outside of mere self-interest and move toward societies based on inclusive care for all human and beyond human existence. We know because we have seen and continue to see examples of it. Process philosophy and process-

relational theology give us the tools to see that all existence, not just humanity, is deeply connected and interwoven in a network of solidarity and mutuality. To the extent we can grasp that fundamental truth and listen deeply for God's luring and leading, we strengthen our ability to resist and uproot our collective human tendency to sin.

Jeff Wells is the lead pastor of the [Church of the Village](#), a progressive, radically inclusive, and anti-racist community in the New York City. He preaches, practices, and promotes process-relational and open & relational theology. Jeff is an active member of the Alliance for Ecological Civilization. In 2022, he helped found and co-chaired the [Living Earth Movement](#). With John B. Cobb Jr., he co-authored a short book, [*Is International Cooperation Possible? A Bold Appeal for a Living Earth*](#) (2022). Website: jeffrywells.love

