

Children

What is this? (Let them guess the flower.) I love flowers, don't you? Flowers add so much beauty to our world. We all love to smell a beautiful flower. Girls can look so pretty with a flower placed carefully in their hair. A man might even wear a flower in his lapel on special occasions. When someone is sick we send them flowers. When we are in love we send flowers. We place flowers on our altar to remind us that Christ is alive bringing love and beauty to his world.

Most flowers have to be planted and carefully cultivated. That's the difference between a flower and a weed. Weeds will grow anywhere and usually do. But a flower usually takes some care.

That's the way our spiritual lives are. Usually we have to work at the things that really matter. If we want to be a good athlete, we have to exercise and practice. If we want to be a good student, we have to study and read and learn. If we want to follow Jesus, we need to work at it, too. We work at being loving to others. We work at remembering to pray. We come to Sunday School even when we might like to do something else. And as a result, we become beautiful people inwardly. We become beautiful flowers rather than merely weeds that always do what comes easy. Remember, God created you to be a beautiful flower.

Ch

I

On a sunny day in September, 1972, a stern-face, plainly dressed man could be seen standing still on a street corner in the busy Chicago Loop. As pedestrians hurried by on their way to lunch or business, he would solemnly lift his right arm, and pointing to the person nearest him, intone loudly the single word "GUILTY!"

Then, without any change of expression, he would resume his stiff stance for a few moments before repeating the gesture. Then, again, the inexorable raising of the arm, the pointing, and the solemn pronouncing of the one word "GUILTY!"(1)

Members of the lunch hour crowd would stare as they passed by at the strange performance. They would stop for a moment, look away, glance at each other, look back at the man, and then hurry on their ways. One man, turning to another, exclaimed: "But how did he know?"

Are we all guilty? And, if so, of what? and before whom? and can we ever straighten it out?

John the Baptist preached, "Repent for the kingdom of God is near." Jesus did likewise. The Apostle Paul declared, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God..." and "the wages of sin is death..." (Romans 3:23 and 6:23). The author of 1 John asserts: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1:8-9).

Guilt, sin, self-deception, a just and demanding God, repentance, forgiveness ” sometimes these sound like words from long ago and far away, like reciting Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in Middle English ” "When that Aprille with his shoures soote/The droghte of Marche hath perced to the roote."

Somewhere along the way, the word "sin" fell out of favor. As Karl Menninger, the prominent psychiatrist and co-founder of the clinic bearing his family's name, asks in his provocative book, *WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?* The simple answer is that it became as unfashionable as the celluloid collar and the whalebone bustle. We gained something with its passing ” relief, release, freedom, enhanced self-image, and self-confidence. But we lost something, too. Dr. Menninger laments:

The very word "sin," which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being's life plan and life style. But the word went away. (2)

Perhaps the word has fallen out of favor, but has the reality? We may have dropped the word, but we still, with guilty consciences, break the rules of society. With a profound sense of dread, we violate our own individual moral codes. We may not like the word, but we know all too well that we cause pain to others, destroy our environment, and harm ourselves.

Sin Is More Than Failing to Live Up to Our Potential, More Than Neglecting Our Shoulds."

It is aggressive, ruthless, hurting. It is a breaking away from God and the rest of humanity. It is alienation. It is rebellion. Menninger notes, "The willful disregard or sacrifice of the welfare of others for the welfare or satisfaction of the self is an essential quality of the concept sin."(3) Somebody is defied. Somebody is hurt. Somebody who deserves to be loved is denied love. As we learned in Sunday School, "sin" is a three-letter word with "I" in the middle ” a very large capital "I." Sin is selfish, I-centered existence.

Two Meanings of Sin

This morning, I want to emphasize two senses of the word "sin": Sin as failure to keep one's word; and sin as refusal to accept responsibility for one's words and acts. **SIN IS LIVING AS THOUGH THE OTHER GUY IS SUPPOSED TO HONOR HIS COMMITMENTS BUT EXCUSING OURSELVES FOR NOT KEEPING OURS.** God made a contract with Adam and Eve. They broke it. God made a covenant with the nation Israel. They turned to other gods and neglected the demands of justice to which they had pledged themselves. Jesus Christ offered the new covenant sealed with his blood, a community of Spirit-endowed brothers and sisters whose life would manifest the lordship of God. We have all committed ourselves to live by our Lord's example of self-sacrifice and service. We have given our word repeatedly in the worship and

sacraments of this church and by voluntarily accepting membership in this community. But do we keep our word?

Sin is deluding ourselves into believing that it is all right not to honor our commitments. Sin is each of us accepting his or her own feeble excuses " "everybody else does it; it really doesn't make any difference; I'm only one person; rules are made to be broken; there are always exceptions, the other guy will understand that I was too busy," so on and so forth.

Sin is not only an individual failing, it is a social menace. We often speak about the twentieth century as an age of anxiety. Anxiety is a direct result of never knowing whom to believe, whose word is bond, whose product is dependable, which politician will keep his campaign promises, what advertising campaign is the dissemination of accurate information and what advertising is psychological manipulation. Anxiety is the natural result of fearing that my spouse will be faithless, my employees dishonest, my environment poisoned, the money in my pockets debased by inflation, the wheels will fall off of my new car, the washer repairman will not show up on Wednesday morning even though I have stayed home from work in order to let him in, the can opener that I just bought will not open cans, the physician will misdiagnose my condition and recommend unneeded surgery. Anxiety is not being able to take my brothers and sisters in Christ at their word when they offer me their caring, support, and love.

We are so overwhelmed when our friends or employees or employers or business associates or spouses or professionals or manufacturers of goods or tradesmen who provide services to keep their word, actually perform as we expect them to perform, really deliver what we have paid them for, that we feel like nominating them for the Nobel Prize!

We have become so conditioned to accepting less than we pay for, to scaling down our expectations, to maintaining modest hopes. We are part of an unspoken conspiracy to tolerate incompetence, dishonesty, and inferiority: I will tolerate your incompetence, dishonesty, and inferiority in hopes that you will tolerate mine.

Dodging Responsibility

Sin is dodging responsibility. "Why did you disobey my instructions?" God asked Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam's response, a classic of shifting the blame, was: "The women you gave me " she told me to."

I learned a long time ago that I would never know for sure whether what I believed was true or false. So I would have to decide for myself how I was going to live. Was I going to live as though there were a just and loving God? As though I were accountable for my actions? As though I could change the direction of my own life and could make a difference in the lives of others? Or was I going to live a life of excuses?

Jesus had a special contempt for those he called hypocrites, those who professed a standard of conduct, condemned others who fell short of the mark, but excused themselves from the wholehearted observance of the rules of the game. He made clear that attending religious services, giving money to charity, even preaching and working miracles in his name could not substitute for doing what the Father wants. And what does God want? The words are simple: justice, mercy, humility, love, service. Every moment of every day is a demand, an invitation, an opportunity. We may respond with the wholeness of our being, accept responsibility, commit ourselves; or we can drift from one immediate satisfaction to the next, forever justifying the unjustifiable, excusing the inexcusable.

The Wages of Sin

"The wages of sin is death." Paul tells us that in the sixth chapter of Romans. Death is being cut off from the love of others as the result of our selfishness. Death is ending up with no character at all because the excuses that we offer become more real to our family and friends than the deeds which express who we are. Death is a society without direction in which everyone is for himself or herself. Death is life without a sense that what I do counts, that I stand for something, that my acts, deeds, and work are of value. Death is not knowing the difference between human beings and the projections or images I have of them and always responding to my own projections rather than to real people. Death is always having to be right and ending up right and alone forever.

Paul Tillich wondered if we moderns had lost a feeling for the meaning of sin? He asked, "Do we realize that sin does not mean an immoral act, that `sin should never be used in the plural, and that not our sins, but rather our sin is the great, all-pervading problem of our life. To be in a state of sin is to be in the state of separation."(4) To be in a state of sin is to be separated from nature, from one's fellow human beings, from one's own true nature, and from God.

But the gift of God is life " abundant life, life of the ages, life energized by the presence of God himself, life shared and replenished in a community of brothers and sisters. Sin produces separation. The grace of God grants restoration and wholeness.

The Difference Between Being Guilty and Feeling Guilty

There is an enormous difference between feeling guilty and and being guilty. Although I believe as did Menninger in the enduring value of the concept of sin, I do not believe in the value of feeling guilty. As I read the Gospel, God does not want our shame, he wants our repentance. As feelings, guilt and shame are of little lasting significance. Actions motivated by guilt are so centered in the needs of the guilty person that they often have little to do with the needs of the party on whose behalf they are undertaken. Assuaging a guilty conscience by acts of charity is not what I am advocating at the moment.

When I recognize that I am guilty, that I have acted in ways that are harmful to others or to myself, it matters little whether or not I feel guilty. The recognition of guilt leads to wholeness if and only if I admit my guilt and do something about it. Let me use two more old-fashioned words to describe the path to wholeness. These words are "confession" and "atonement." For the early Christian church, confession was a public act. Menninger tells us:

The order of worship was, first of all, self-disclosure and confession of sin...This was followed by appropriate announcement of penance, pleas for forgiveness, and plans for making restitution. A final period of friendly fellowship...closed the meeting.(5)

When the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, and the church and state became one, open personal disclosure was replaced by private confession to a priest. The closest we come today outside of the confessional at this church is the awkward and archaic confession of sin included at the beginning of Mass. If you want to witness the transforming power of self-disclosure and confession of sin, attend Alcoholics Anonymous or any other 12-step group.

Guilt leading to confession, restitution, reconciliation, growth, and renewal -- now there is an exciting concept. That is something worth sinning for! That is a concept of sin which, instead of plunging me into despair and depression, fills me with hope. WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? And the payoff for keeping one's word, for accepting responsibility, for responding to others with love and concern? The pay off is that by living as though there is a just and loving God, we experience a just and loving God. By living as though our individual lives have significance and meaning, they have significance and meaning. By acting and speaking as though our church is a community of those who bear one another's burdens, our church becomes a community of those who bear one another's burdens. The church becomes a place where we stop denying the reality of sin, a place where we accept the fact that we are accountable and responsible, a place where we experience the love and forgiveness of God, a place where we love and forgive one another, a place for confession and transformation.

Once again, there is the inexorable raising of the arm. But this time it points the way to wholeness. Amen.

II

Some of you may be campers. Summertime means adventures in the great outdoors. One thing I've discovered is that camping isn't for everyone. Reed Glenn of the Daily Camera in Boulder, Colorado compiled a list of comments received by the US Forest Service from back packers and campers: "Too many bugs and leeches and spiders," wrote one unhappy camper. "Please spray the wilderness to rid the area of these pests." Another wrote, "A McDonald's would be nice at trail head." And one more adventurer wrote, "The coyotes make too much noise and kept us awake. Please eradicate these annoying animals." (1) Some people are not meant for camping. Jesus seems to be saying to us in our text for the day that some people are not meant for the life of faith. Our faith is for everybody, but not

everybody is a good candidate for faith. "A farmer went out to sow his seed," Jesus said. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some of the seed fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, but when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns. The thorns choked the emerging plants. But some of the seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. "He who has ears," said Jesus, "let him hear." Jesus is saying there are four basic responses to the Gospel. The first is, "I don't get it"; the second is, "I got it, but it's not for me"; the third is, "I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now"; and the last is, "I got it, I want it, thank God for it!" Let's examine our own lives for a few moments and see where we might be on that continuum. Let's begin with "I don't get it." **I. I Don't Get It.** Alan Bean was the Commander of Apollo XIII and the fourth man to walk on the moon. A friend asked him about the spiritual side of a ride through space. The friend commented that some astronauts say they felt the presence of God. "Was that a common experience?" the friend asked. Alan Bean was quiet for a moment, then he replied, "Some did, and some did not. Deep space is no different from here in that regard. We always find what we expect to find." (2) Alan Bean was right. We find what we expect to find. Some people never find God, primarily because they never look for God. They are satisfied with their lives just as they are, or they are so unhappy with their lives that they don't see any hope. Regardless, the thought of God rarely crosses their mind. They just don't get this religion business, and they let the opportunity to welcome God into their lives slip right on by. In 1973 Gary Kildall wrote the first popular operating system for personal computers, named CP/M. IBM approached Kildall in 1980 about developing the operating system for IBM PCs. But Kildall snubbed IBM officials at a crucial meeting. The day IBM came calling, he chose to fly his new airplane. The frustrated IBM executives turned instead to Bill Gates, founder of a small software company called Microsoft, and his operating system named MS-DOS. (3) Today, nearly twenty years later Bill Gates is worth more than seventy billion dollars. Gary Kildall didn't quite get it. He didn't realize his big opportunity when it came. And so it is with the life of faith. Some people just don't get it. They're off flying a plane when the Master calls. They miss their big opportunity. They never quite make it inside the fold of believers. **II. I Got It, But It's Not for Me.** Other people respond, "I got it, but it's not for me." These are people who have been exposed to the Gospel, think they understand the Gospel, but consciously choose to go off in another direction. A small congregation was facing some difficult decisions. Its denomination was moving in a new direction, and the members of the church were apprehensive about what those changes might mean for them. "œLet's pray about it," the pastor urged. "Let's meet once a week and seek God's direction." But to the pastor's dismay, only one person showed up for the prayer meetings--the president of the congregation. "We don't want to pray about it," the president stated flatly. "We already know what we think about these new developments, and if we pray, there's a chance that God might change our minds." (4) I don't believe I have heard a better description of the, "I got it, but it's not for me" mentality. Don't think that the people Jesus described as rocky soil are necessarily outside the church. Anytime we resist God's will, we fall in that category. A survey of U.S. drivers by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration finds that 60 percent think speeding by other drivers is a threat to their personal safety. But the same survey also found that 23 percent admit that they have exceeded the speed limit themselves by more than 10 mph during the previous week. In addition to speeding, drivers say they fear a number of other bad driving habits; many reported they have recently seen other drivers weaving in and out of traffic, tailgating, drinking and driving, or ignoring red lights and stop signs. (AP) Their worst fear of all? I quote: "œPeople who drive the way I do." (5) It's amazing how often we know what we ought to do--or ought not to do--but we still

do not act accordingly. A few years ago Eric Berne wrote a very influential book called, *Games People Play*. In it he described a psychological game which he called, "Yes, but." Berne's game is played by two people, one who apparently has a problem, and the other who has to try to solve it. A typical example would go like this: "My husband beats me." "Then leave him." "Yes, but I love him." "Then persuade him to get help." "Yes, but he would never go." "Then threaten to leave him." "Yes, but he would beat me more." Eventually the game ends when the one suggesting the solutions has to admit defeat: "Well, I'm stumped. I don't know what else to suggest," leaving the obstinate victim smiling smugly at being beyond assistance. Berne then suggests how to turn this around. The victim complains, "My husband beats me." The problem-solver says, "That's really sad. What do you intend to do about it?" (6) The "yes, but" game is played by people who got it, but don't have any intention of doing anything about it. That's the second response to the Gospel, "I got it, but it's not for me." **III. I Got It, I Want It, But I'm Too Busy Right Now.** Here is the third response: "I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now." Here is where many of us are. We believe the Good News of Christ. We treasure our faith. But our commitment to Christ is peripheral. We have many priorities in our life and our faith is but one of those priorities. It was early evening on November 9, 1965, when a power station at Niagara Falls became overloaded with power demands. It was set to measure power output, and to transfer power to a backup system if the output rose too high. This system had been put in place two years earlier, but no one had thought to re-adjust the measurements to reflect the changes in power demands in those two years. At the first sign of a power overload, the station shut down and began transferring power to the backup generators. These, too, became overloaded and shut down, resulting in a massive blackout across most of the northeastern United States and Canada. Airports, utilities, corporations, schools, hospitals, public transportation systems, and homes were without power for thirteen hours. Millions of people were affected. And all because someone had not thought to re-adjust the numbers on the main generator. (7) I see people every day who are overloaded, and it's not that easy to re-set the numbers. We want to do everything so well. We want to provide for our families and excel in our work and make sure our children are able to participate in all kinds of extracurricular activities and look after aging parents and the list suddenly becomes overwhelming, and religion, well it will just have to take its place in line. Jesus described us well when he said that "other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants." It's easy to feel choked, isn't it, by our many responsibilities? But, listen, there is a solution. That solution is to find such a center of peace for our lives that we no longer have to feel suffocated by life, so that we no longer have to hurry frantically through life. This, of course, brings us to the fourth response we can make to the life of faith: "I got it, I want it, thank God for it!" There are people--Jesus called them "good soil"--who are receptive to the Good News of Christ. They understand that faith is not meant to be an add-on. It is not a burden you carry in addition to other burdens. When we open ourselves to Christ and say to him, "All I am, all I have, all I hope to be, I give to you," we discover a sudden lifting of all our burdens. Then we restructure our priorities according to our faith commitment. Dr. Tom Kim did that. Dr. Kim is the Korean born grandson of a Presbyterian minister. Arriving in the United States, his family settled in Knoxville, TN. He chose a small Christian college to attend. Kim wanted to be a medical missionary to Korea. When he prepared to attend Korean medical schools, despite being accepted at Indiana University, his mother was opposed. "She never wanted to go back and didn't want me to either," Kim says. Evidently his mother's wishes prevailed, because when he finished Korean medical school he returned to Knoxville and has been practicing internal medicine, hematology and oncology since 1979. The unique thing about Dr. Kim's office is that he does not charge the uninsured or the working poor. "My father became a physician because he didn't want to be so poor

as his father, the minister. But he still had the faith and I do, too. I finally realized that I didn't have to go so far to find people in need that I could minister to." Dr. Kim estimates that he has seen 1,000 poor patients. When he began this policy five years ago, he set aside two extra hours a night for treating nonpaying patients after each of four days of regular office hours. Now, all his patients, both insured and uninsured, are seen throughout the work days. "I give them free everything. Sometimes I have free samples from drug companies for giving medicine. Sometimes I give them a check to buy medicine." For patients with ailments he can't treat, Dr. Kim makes referrals. Dr. Kim says that most of his free patients could get nowhere if they made the referral calls, but he can! "I explain this patient is without insurance and ask if they can't treat them and work out something on payment." Kim says donating his time is a way of repaying his debt to the U.S. where he's "prospered so much." "I think 'Who was Jesus Christ? What did he do?'" Kim said. "He didn't run with the politicians, the big shots, the rich people. He helped people in need. I got a talent--curing sick people--and I want to use it to do a little of what Jesus did. I don't want to be a Sunday-only Christian." (8) Four responses to the life of faith: "I don't get it"; "I got it, but it's not for me"; "I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now"; "I got it, I want it, thank God for it!" Every one of us is somewhere along that continuum. Only one of these responses, however, will bring us life abundant. "He who has ears," said Jesus, "let him hear." _____ 1. THE JOKESMITH, Monday, June 30, 1997. 2. THE JOKESMITH, Vol. XII #1, 1996, p. 2. 3. CONTEMPORARY ILLUSTRATIONS FOR PREACHERS, TEACHERS, & WRITERS, Craig Brian Larson, ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), p. 217. 4. Penelope J. Stokes, SIMPLE WORDS OF WISDOM: 52 VIRTUES FOR EVERY WOMAN (Nashville: Countryman, 1998), p. 50. 5. Randy Cassingham, THIS IS TRUE, for 7 February, 1999. 6. Geoff Burch, THE ART AND SCIENCE OF BUSINESS PERSUASION (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994). 7. James Burke, CONNECTIONS (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978). Cited in Kallestad, Walt. WAKE UP YOUR DREAMS (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), pp. 101-102. 8. KNOXVILLE (TN) NEWS-SENTINEL, 7-11-98, p. A4, "Doctor Ministers to Poor."

III Fr Desiano

We used to hear “The pen is mightier than the sword,” back in the old days when words appeared mostly in newspapers and books. Today most words appear in electronic form and the might of words has become an endless battle between opinions and ideas on the Internet. We consider not only the might of these words but also their capacity for manipulation and even deceit. Nevertheless, as our first reading reminds us, words do transform things, nothing more so than the Word of God.

If we asked a lot of folks about God’ Word, we’d get different responses. Some religious groups provide enormous resources to help their adherents read the Bible. Many Catholics, on the other hand, find it difficult to remember where their Bible might be in their house. That is why today’s Gospel reading, about the Sower and the Seed, provides us an opportunity to reflect on God’s Word in our life.

We come to church or, these days, watch Mass online. Over half the time we spend at Mass is devoted to the Word of God. Sunday by Sunday we hear God’s word addressed to us. This can be so routine that many of us don’t realize its power or its effect on our lives. Every single Sunday the Gospel is calling us to conversion, to commitment, to deeper discipleship. As we hear these words together, we are saying that, as a community, we hold ourselves accountable for them. In front of each other we are saying that we know we need to live the Gospel we are hearing.

The parable we hear about the Sower can be easy to misunderstand. We can conclude that, whatever God does, our destinies are fixed, that we are rocky soil, or thorn-filled soul, or just a roadway. But obviously the parable is not saying this. Rather, the parable is calling all of us to ask how we have let that Word of God into our hearts, and how we are letting that Word transform us.

Indeed, that Word is powerful enough to penetrate the rockiness of our hearts, or the shallowness of our vision, or the distractions and temptations that beset us. Indeed, rather than just lying inert on the ground, the seed of God's life penetrates us, empowering us to accomplish its good in our everyday lives. Indeed, God's Word wants to bear fruit in us—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred-fold.

Consider, for example, the powerful message from the second reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul offers us a stunning image, that of groaning. He applies this image to dimensions of our personal lives because he knows the suffering all of us go through. But he also applies it to creation itself, inviting us to see every moment of our existence as a step toward that ultimate birth when we come to the fullness of life.

Cannot you and I reflect on the sufferings of our lives, on the great pain in our nation, on the great struggles of our world—can we not see these in a new light, as a way in which we are invited to grow in hope, to believe in God's future for us even though we go through difficulties? God sows this word in us to give us a new vision of ourselves and our world.

Some words are mightier than other words. But all the words we use come and go. The Word of God, springing from God's infinite love, is the last word, the most powerful word, the word that abides. We pray for the grace not only to hear it, but, most especially, to live it.