

# Behold the Lamb of God! A Sermon on Sin and Freedom

Psalm 40:1-10

Isaiah 49:1-7

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-41



In our gospel reading this morning, John the Baptist announces: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29). John’s statement is a brief summary of the heart of the Christian faith. Christian faith is about Jesus. Who is Jesus? He is someone who has a special relationship to God. “He is the Lamb of God.” He is also, according to John’s gospel, “the Word of God,” “the Son of God,” “the Christ,” “the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” the “Bread of life,” “the Water of life,” and a number of other things.

What does Jesus do? He takes away the sin of the world. These are the two central affirmations of Christian faith. Lose either affirmation – who Jesus is and what Jesus does – and you no longer have Christian faith. Yet both of these affirmations have become increasingly problematic in contemporary Western culture, and, significantly enough, I think, the second more than the first.

Let me illustrate what I mean by mentioning two incidents that

happened in the last several weeks, one in secular culture and one in the church. The first is the notorious Duck Dynasty incident. Phil Robertson, the star of a reality television series about a family of self-styled backwoods Bible thumpers who became millionaires from making duck calls created a cultural firestorm when he answered a question addressed to him in a magazine interview: "What in your mind is sinful?" I am not going to repeat Robertson's answer here. You are no doubt familiar with the story.

The second event was the appearance of a new Church of England baptismal rite. Supposedly the rite had been rewritten to put it in the language of East Enders in London, who apparently could not make sense of the current rite of baptism in the Church of England's Common Worship liturgy. What is significant about the new rite is not that the language is simplified so that East Enders can understand it, but that the language changes the actual meaning of the rite. It removes all language of sin, and all references to Jesus as Savior from sin. The baptized no longer "die to sin," but to "all that destroys." The baptized do not renounce sin; they renounce evil. Throughout the new liturgy, in every case in which the word "sin" appears in the current rite, the word "evil" is substituted.

What both of these incidents have in common is that they reflect the discomfort our society currently has with the notion of sin. In some sermons, this would be the place where I would lament that we now live in a world in which there is no more difference between right and wrong, that we live in a culture where there are no absolutes, and all morality is now relative. But it is not true that contemporary society has no absolutes or does not believe in the difference between right and wrong. Contemporary culture certainly has absolutes. Phil Robertson was castigated because he had violated one of those absolutes in an egregious way. Contemporary culture definitely believes in right and wrong, and it definitely believes that

there is such a thing as evil. What it has trouble with is the notion of sin.

What is the essential difference between evil and sin? Evil is horizontal language. Sin is vertical language. Sin always has reference primarily to God. An atheist can reject evil, but an atheist cannot reject sin. By abandoning sin language, the new baptismal rite of the Church of England has abandoned that vertical dimension that makes Christianity Christian. The heated response to Duck Dynasty star Phil Robertson's comments made clear that the culture no longer understands the language of sin. By using the language of sin, Robertson was using vertical language. He was saying that there are certain kinds of behavior that God does not approve of. In all the critical responses to Robinson that I have read, he was interpreted as using horizontal language. Robinson was accused of bigotry because he was interpreted as saying that he personally disapproved of or hated particular kinds of individuals.

Why is it that contemporary culture cannot understand the vertical language of sin? I think the primary reason for this is that the prevailing worldview in contemporary Western culture is one that places individualism and freedom as its two primary values. Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart has called this worldview "normal nihilism." Hart has written: "We live in an age whose chief moral value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the absolute liberty of personal volition, the power of each of us to choose what he or she believes, wants, needs, or must possess." In a recent Supreme Court decision, Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote: "At the heart of liberty is the right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life." This absolute primacy of autonomy and individual freedom is shared by both the political left and right in today's so-called "culture wars." It is evident in the political discourse in which both conservatives and liberals share the common rhetoric of "freedom" and "rights."

If the one absolute value is autonomy and freedom from restraint, and, since people have not only the choice, but the responsibility to define their own existence or meaning, the one threat that must be resisted is anything that would restrict those choices, or any hint that there would be a transcendent source of meaning or value above those individual choices that would define these things for us instead of letting us define them for ourselves. This is the real reason, I think, for the heated reaction to the Duck Dynasty interview. It also explains why the Church of England baptismal rite uses only horizontal language, and does not talk about sin.

But at the same time that this autonomous individualism is assumed without argument to be self-evidently true, it also creates problems. First, it is a nonsensical view in that it ignores that we are all members of various communities – families, churches, workplaces, neighborhoods – and those communities exist before we are born and will exist after we die, and they largely form who we are. As the poet John Donne famously wrote, “No man is an island.”

Autonomous individualism also makes it difficult to form communities, or to get people to be loyal to any cause that demands personal sacrifice in order to benefit a community. People need something transcendent to their own individuality in order to motivate them to act in a way that benefits others. Since the need to create our own values does not allow us to find this transcendence by using the vertical language of God, we need to create horizontal substitutes for transcendence instead.

The recent Avengers movie provides an example of the way that popular culture demonstrates this need to create substitutes for divine transcendence as a corrective to unrestrained autonomy. In the movie, a bunch of individualist super-heroes are confronted by the threat of an evil invasion that could destroy the planet earth, but the very individualism that

makes them such great super-heroes is keeping them from working together. They need a common cause to unite them. It is only after the death of a minor character in the movie, agent Phil Coulson, that they are finally motivated to put aside their differences to work together as a team. The threatened destruction of the entire planet was not enough to bring them together, but the death of a single individual was.

There is another paradox here. Contemporary autonomous individualism leads to both a desire for community, and a distrust of community. Communities are desired because individualism leads to loneliness, and autonomy also makes it impossible to cooperate to get anything done. But community is feared because it is believed that those who have power in communities are simply trying to impose their own agenda on others, thus violating the individual's freedom, which is, again, the one absolute value. If you saw the Avengers movie, you'll remember that one of the concerns that the various super-heroes had was that they were not quite sure that they could trust Nick Fury, the head of the organization S.H.I.E.L.D, who had brought them together, because S.H.I.E.L.D was a secretive bureaucracy with its own agenda. How could they be sure they were not being lied to? And in fact they were. We found out after the movie was released that Agent Coulson had not really died after all because he had to appear in a new television series. Nick Fury had falsely led the Avengers to believe that Coulson had died so that he could give them a cause to believe in so that they would work together. And apparently that lie was okay because it produced the desired result. So paradoxically, the entire premise of the movie, that the Avengers needed a cause transcendent to their own individualism in order to get them to work together, and to overcome their fear of being lied to, was itself based on a lie.

So contemporary culture is stuck. We need and want community because individualism is incapable of transcending its own

self-interest. Yet we are distrustful of communities because we can never be sure that those with power in these communities are not simply trying to use their own freedom to restrict our freedom, and we can never be sure that they are not lying to us. As Jean Paul Sartre famously said, "Hell is other people."

The biblical writers lived in a world that could not have imagined the value that Western culture puts on autonomy and unrestrained freedom. Ancient Mediterranean culture was a culture of families, communities, and cultural groups, not of independent individuals. Some of the key themes in the New Testament have to do with how the gospel addresses divisions between such groups, for instance, Jews and Gentiles. Nonetheless, it is surprising just how well the New Testament addresses both the concerns and the inherent contradictions of contemporary autonomous individualism. Let's look at the gospel of John as an example.

First, John's gospel addresses the need for a transcendent source of meaning that points beyond the autonomy of the individualist self. Turning again to this morning's gospel passage, we read, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29). It is Jesus who provides that transcendent meaning, but he does not do so in a straightforward way that simply contrasts the vertical language of the divine with the horizontal language of humanity. Rather, Jesus is the one in whom both the vertical and horizontal come together in a single person. If we turn to the beginning of John's gospel, we discover that Jesus is the Word who was in the beginning with God, and who is God (John 1:1). Jesus is also the creator, both of the universe and of humanity: "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." (vs. 3-4). John's gospel tells us that this divine Word became a human being. "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory,

glory of the only Son from the father, full of grace and truth." (1:14) So Jesus can provide a genuine transcendence that can reach beyond the limits of our mere human individuality. He is the Word made flesh, the one through whom our world has been made. And yet Jesus is not foreign to us. The Word of God is not simply the divine omnipotence bearing down on hapless human beings in a way that would crush our freedom and dignity. He is the Word who has become one of us. He is the one who has made the unknown transcendent known by coming to us as a fellow human being. As John wrote, "No one has seen God at any time. The only Son who in the bosom of the Father, has made him known." (1:18).

Jesus also addresses our need for community, but in a way that overcomes the fear of distrust of others that is one of the inherent tensions of contemporary individualism. First, the kind of divine transcendence that Jesus represents is not that of an isolated monad, an all-powerful individual who comes down from the sky to impose his despotic will on us like one of the pagan gods. (He is not like Loki in the Avengers movie.) Nor is Jesus the impersonal Unmoved Mover of Aristotle or the Neoplatonic One of Plotinus. Rather, Jesus' divine transcendence is that of a love based in an eternal community of the Trinitarian persons. This is also a major theme in John's gospel. In the high priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus prays to the Father: "And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." (17:5). In Jesus' last supper discourse, he promises his disciples: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you." (14:16). We encounter this triune community in today's gospel reading, when John the Baptist says at the event of Jesus' baptism, "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He

on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." (1:32-34).

It is this trinitarian love between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that provides the motivating factor in Jesus' mission throughout John's gospel. The most famous verse in the gospel reminds us that God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life (3:16). The Father's purpose in sending the Son into the world is not for our destruction, but for our salvation: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (v. 17). This love that motivated the Father to give his Son for the salvation of humanity is poured out for us on the cross, the place where the divine love demonstrates itself to its fullest. In another saying that we find in the last supper discourse, Jesus tells his disciples, clearly referring to his own death: "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (15:13).

John's gospel makes clear that it is this community of love between the Father, the Son and the Spirit, that provides the ground for a community of disciples that gathers around Jesus. Jesus says to his followers: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (15: 9,10). There is no other way to become partners in this love between the Father and Son except that of discipleship, the way of following Jesus. Becoming disciples of Jesus is not a matter of becoming slaves to a domineering tyrant who wants to limit our choices, but of becoming friends with him and with his Father: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made



known to you." And this friendship plays itself out not only on the vertical level, but on the horizontal level as well. It is precisely through loving one another as Jesus has loved us that we demonstrate that we are his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34, 35).

We see the beginnings of this theme of discipleship appearing in this morning's gospel reading. John the Baptist speaks to two of his own disciples: "Behold, the Lamb of God," and they turn from following John to become followers of Jesus. Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, then goes to Peter to tell him, "We have found the Messiah." (1:36,41). Jesus is the transcendent source of meaning who links the divine vertical and the human horizontal to make possible a new community in which those who become his disciples discover that they are his friends who have come to share in the divine love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Those who follow Jesus obey his commandments because those commandments flow out of God's love, and this vertical love expresses itself horizontally as well. As the writer of John's gospel also writes in 1 John, "By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world." (1 John 5:2-4).

It might seem that we have wandered quite a bit from the question with which we began this sermon: "What about sin?" But before we could talk about sin, it was necessary to lay out the trinitarian and communitarian context within which sin makes sense, and without which, it makes no sense. As I mentioned earlier, apart from some kind of genuine transcendent basis for our decisions, it is impossible to move beyond the contradictions of individualism and autonomy to do

such things as create community or find motivation for actions that demand sacrifice. And such a transcendent basis must be genuine. The substitutes that modern Western culture regularly tries to provide are simply not adequate to the task because they are all horizontal. You can't lift yourself by your own bootstraps.

But once admit such a genuine transcendent alternative to mere human autonomy, and the notion of sin makes sense. Sin is not simply something that interferes with an individual's ability fully to actualize his or her own individual potential or to create their own values. Sin is a violation of love. Specifically, sin is a violation of the love that created heaven and earth, and has come to us in Jesus to call us out of our individualism and autonomy in order that we might become his disciples. It is only in coming to share in the trinitarian love between Jesus, his Father and the Spirit of truth as we become his friends that we can also begin to love one another as he has loved us.

This leads, finally, to a brief discussion of freedom, which, along with autonomy, is the one self-evident value in contemporary secular culture. Much of what I have been trying to say in this sermon is that mere autonomy is an incoherent value. It is only through relations with others, and specifically through a relationship, first, with the triune God, made possible through Jesus Christ, and, second with Jesus's friends, that human beings can flourish. But I also want to say that the notion of freedom that is embraced by contemporary culture is an incoherent notion. In our culture, freedom simply means the ability to do whatever I want without restraints. In the modern Western world, freedom makes you free. Contemporary people find the notion of sin to be objectionable because labeling something as sin restrains that freedom. To the contrary, in John's gospel, Jesus defines freedom in a very different way, in terms of discipleship. Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my

disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:31-32). When Jesus’ opponents protest against this that they are not slaves because they are descendents of Abraham, Jesus replies: “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” (v. 34). The statement that the truth will make you free is one that even modern secularists love to quote, but they ignore the first half of Jesus’ saying. According to Jesus, the kind of autonomous individualism that our culture embraces does not make you free. It makes you a slave of sin. It is following Jesus that makes you free. And Jesus can set you free because he is the way, the truth and the life who can deliver us from the sin of enslavement to the insistence on our own independence and unrestrained autonomy. But that actually means that talk about sin is not bad news, but good news because, if I am a slave to sin, it is good news that Jesus has come to set me free. Jesus came to set me free from the slavery of my self-imprisonment. If I am guilty of sin, it is good news to hear the word of Jesus in John’s gospel, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (3:17).

The contemporary gospel of autonomy and individualism will not make us free because freedom does not make us free. What David Bentley Hart has called “normal nihilism” is not enough to provide for even a secular morality. The forms of artificial transcendence that the culture creates in the absence of genuine transcendence can never be enough to pull us out of the isolated individualism of ourselves. We delude ourselves if we think that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. However, we can rejoice that the love that has come to us in Jesus Christ has made us friends with God and with one another, and the truth of discipleship to Jesus really does make us free. We can therefore join in with John the Baptist’s proclamation: “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”