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4 Week Series

Week 1: Who Knows What Evil Lurks in the Hearts of . . . ?

Romans 7:13-25; Matthew 15:10-20

My daughter is home for the weekend, which means that the stations on my car radio will have been repositioned by Monday. But this is not new behavior. When my daughter was learning to talk, the first four words she assembled into a sentence were the words: "I get my station." Were it not for

the car, I'd hardly listen to radio anymore. But there was a day when I would sit for hours and let the radio create marvelous pictures in my mind. Consider one of my favorite programs, *The Shadow*.

It took a long time before I could listen, given that the first thirty seconds of *The Shadow* scared the bejeebers out of me. First there was silence. Then footsteps . . . slow, deliberate footsteps . . . growing louder . . . growing closer . . . until they reached the door. It took fifteen seconds for that door to open, creaking every inch of the way. The sound was enough to make the hairs on my body stand at attention. Finally came the voice: "Who knows what evil lurks within the hearts of men?" Followed by the answer: "The Shadow knows." It was great theater, and it wasn't bad theology, either. For it goes without saying that there is a lot of evil lurking someplace.

There are those who claim that evil is lodged in only a few. This is the "bad apple" theory, vigorously argued by the mother of a boyhood chum. She had six kids, you see. Five of them were good. One of them was bad. Since 83 percent of her kids turned out perfectly, and since she had raised them all the same, it meant that one of her kids was a bad apple.

Working against the "bad apple" theory is Floyd Starr's (not his real name) theory. "There's no such thing as a bad boy," Floyd said. "But sometimes, the world takes good boys and messes 'em up. Therefore, such boys need to be taken to nice places with nice people who will unmess 'em and return 'em to their natural state of goodness."

Then we have the Flip Wilson, "Calvin and Hobbes" variation on the Floyd Starr theory. They argue: "Don't blame us. We're good boys. But something has taken hold of us over which we have absolutely no control." Flip was that funny man who would dress up as a woman named Geraldine. Then he would proclaim: "I didn't buy that dress. The devil made me buy that dress." To which Calvin added a new wrinkle. In one memorable series of strips, Calvin invented a duplicating machine that cloned six of him. Suddenly there were multiple Calvins running around doing bad stuff, for which the original Calvin was being blamed. "That wasn't really me," Calvin said. "It must have been someone who looked like me."

But none of these theories cuts it. To those who say that evil is none of us—a few rotten ones of us, something that possesses us, or masquerades as us—it still appears that a propensity for evil is intrinsic to all of us.

Read Matthew 15, where Jesus is scolded by the Pharisees for not properly washing his hands. To which Jesus says: "It's not what goes into a man's mouth that makes him unclean, but what comes

out of his mouth.” For what comes out of his mouth comes from the heart. And from the heart come all sorts of things, such as evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, threat, perjury, and slander. Which leads one to wonder: “How do those things get into the heart in the first place?” Well, they originate there. They are a part of human nature. Not pretty, but true.

That evil has a name. Its name is “sin.” To be more accurate, its name is “original sin.” I remember doing a baptism and watching a grandmother hold a beautiful baby girl—a baby who hadn’t spit up, cried, or wrinkled her pretty dress for at least an hour. And the grandmother said: “How can the church say that this child lives in sin? This child hasn’t done anything bad in her life.” And grandma was right. The child hadn’t—and wouldn’t—for at least an hour. But the propensity is there. It’s in her nature.

And here’s where the psychologists rescue the theologians. “You want another word for original sin?” they say. “Call it the Shadow.” And what is the Shadow? “It is,” says John Sanford, “the dark, feared, unwanted side of our personality . . . the underside of what we have been taught and shaped to be.” The Shadow is made up of the pieces that don’t fit—the ones that don’t belong in the picture. Or look at it another way. As we develop, we reject certain qualities we neither like nor want the world to see. Therefore, we deny them expression. But simply denying them expression does not mean they go away. They become the Shadow.

Consider the apostle Paul. He writes: “I cannot understand my own behavior. The things I love, I fail to do. The things I hate, I find myself doing. Instead of doing the good things I want, I carry out the sinful things I do not want. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Romans 7).

Consider a preteen girl, jealous of her older sister’s popularity, spreading a vicious lie throughout the school about the sister and her boyfriend. Consider a collegiate male who is something of a loner, typing a fantasy about sexual indulgence, rape, and violence, and then entering it into the Internet. Consider a mother who catches her five-year-old son taking pennies from her purse. In order to teach him the evil of his ways, she holds his hand over the gas flame on the kitchen stove. Unfortunately, she miscalculates, holding it too close for too long, so that for the rest of his life that child will have one good hand and one withered claw. Consider a group of Boy Scouts, all with merit badges in animal husbandry. Then, on a campout, they cruelly dismember a squealing rabbit.

Consider a group of young soldiers, drilled about what to do in every military situation. Then they riddle a village with bullets, even though they have reason to believe that the village contains nothing but women and small children. Consider a television evangelist who preaches nightly against the lures of the flesh, only to lose his credibility in a succession of seedy motel rooms.

Are these bad people? Evil people? Possessed people? Rotten apples? Victims of mistaken identity? Of course not. What’s going on? The Shadow.

Thirty-six years ago, Patty Hearst (that lovable debutante of San Francisco’s society) was kidnapped and transformed into a gun-wielding, curse-spewing, bank-robbing member of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Following which, I said: “I do not fully understand brainwashing. But what I know is that given similar circumstances, stimuli, and opportunity, I would be capable of committing any of these acts.”

Why am I bothering to raise it? Because a Shadow named is a Shadow on the way to being tamed. Once we understand something, we can begin to control it. But until we understand it, it controls us.

Denial is no answer. Repression is no answer. The goal is nothing less than the reconciliation of the Shadow with the remainder of the self. Consider this: most people love the prodigal son. I have preached his story from every angle, save one. What if the story is not about two brothers, but two sides of the same brother? What if the story is about the younger brother in us who would love to throw caution to the wind, hit the road, travel in the fast lane, push out the limits, and see what life is like in the far country, even as the older brother in us plays by the rules, conforms to the

expectations, colors within the lines, and works every night until sundown? Which is Shadow? Which is real? You tell me! But if you read the story carefully, you cannot escape the conclusion that both brothers need each other desperately. Nor can you escape the conclusion that the Father will not be happy until both of the brothers are home.

Week 2: And You Think Your Feet Don't Smell

Romans 5:1-11

The year was 1960 when John Steinbeck outfitted his camper, pulled up stakes, and (with the companionship of an eleven-year-old French poodle) set off to find the real America. He writes:

Sunday morning, in a Vermont town. . . . I took my seat in the rear of the spotless, polished place of worship. The prayers were to the point, directing the attention of the Almighty to certain weaknesses and undivine tendencies I know to be mine and could only suppose were shared by others gathered there. It had been long since I had heard such an approach. It is our practice now, at least in the large cities, to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins aren't really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister, a man of iron with tool-steel eyes and a delivery like a pneumatic drill, opened up with prayer and reassured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. . . . I began to feel good all over. For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness, and that causes the same emptiness a father does playing softball with his son. But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. I felt so revived in spirit that I put five dollars in the plate, and afterward, in front of the church, shook hands warmly with the minister and as many of the congregation as I could. . . . I even considered beating Charley to give him some satisfaction too, because Charley is only a little less sinful than I am. (John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America* [New York: Viking Press, 1962], 77-79)

Now, I am not sure about you, but I liked that twenty-five years ago, and I like it even more today. In the early days of my ministry, I seldom talked about sin. I left that to the "fire and brimstone" boys. Then I mocked them. But sin is no longer a laughing matter. My apology for diminishing it is very much in order.

Actually, it took a psychiatrist to rediscover sin. The good doctor was the esteemed Karl Menninger who suggested that the problem (all along) might have been one of nomenclature. Sin never disappeared. We simply renamed it "sickness." People were no longer sinners so much as they were sick. Deviant behavior resulted from the fact that people were confused, hurt, rejected, misguided, dysfunctionally parented, improperly scripted, and the victims of everything from faulty toilet training to cultural deprivation.

Strangely enough, we began to like this way of looking at things. For whereas "sin" made us feel uncomfortable, "sickness" made us feel better. What's more, if there were no more "sinners," then we could rid our vocabulary of an equally unsettling term, namely, "salvation." For whereas sinners need "saving," all sick people need is "healing."

So where does one come by a theology of sin? Fortunately, my grandmother had one. Prior to her death at age ninety-seven, she was a lapsed Roman Catholic who had the sacred heart of Jesus in her bedroom and a crucifix in her hankie drawer. But she hadn't been to mass in sixty years. Nonetheless, a lengthy absence didn't keep her from articulating a theology of sin; for whenever anybody gave indication of thinking overly highly of themselves, the lady I affectionately called "the old Yugoslav" could be heard to mutter: "And you think your feet don't smell." Actually, she had an alternate version of the same saying. But in deference to her memory, I'm not going to tell you what it was.

From time to time, all feet stink. As a commentary on human nature, hers was the bottom line, the great leveler, not to mention the perfect pinprick in the balloon of all puffiness and pride. I once read that Peter Cartwright, that colorful preacher on the American frontier, used to come riding into settlements on his horse, reins in one hand, Bible in the other, shouting at the top of his lungs: "I smell hell here." Well, he could pick any village in any era and get a nose full. Sin stinks. It stinks to high heaven, which is probably why God smells it first. Sooner or later, however, it stinks closer to home, so that even lapsed Catholics like my grandmother can smell it next.

Frequently, pastors refer to Carroll Simcox's story when he recalls killing a robin with a slingshot he got in his Easter basket in his fifth North Dakota springtime. He felt instant remorse. He also remembered that the only explanation he could come up with was that he had done it "for the hell of it." "But you were only a child," they said to him when he recalled the painful event years later. "You were only five years old." "But," Simcox responded, "I did know better. And I did, indeed, do it just for the hell of it. And what is the hell of it? Hell is seeking one's own pleasure in ways that are contradictory to God's pleasure. And I knew, even at five years old, that God is displeased when I am heartless and cruel . . . especially when I am heartless and cruel for no reason, save for the fact that cruelty can sometimes be quite pleasurable, and heartlessness quite exhilarating."

Once upon a time, I thought that people of faith were immune to such sordidness. But there is no immunity, even for Christians walking in the footsteps of Jesus. On a recent trek through Israel, most participants felt the high point to be our Communion service on the Sea of Galilee. No other buses. No other tourists. Just the sun, the breeze, the rippling waters of the lake, and the incredible memories of one who once walked its shoreline, who, in that moment, may very well have been walking it still.

But there was something about the loaf of bread I was holding in my hands. While eating breakfast, I realized we lacked bread. Then a loaf appeared on the buffet table. For what reason, I do not know. But knowing we needed it, I put a friend up to taking it. Which he did. Surreptitiously. Under his napkin. On the one hand, it was no big deal. The maître d' of the dining room may have been happy to give it to us. On the other hand, we didn't ask. We stole the Communion bread, for God's sake. And the fact that that was why we did it—for God's sake—didn't necessarily take the stain from our hands or the smell from our feet.

All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But why rub our noses in it? Rather than answer that question, let me take you back to Steinbeck and his Vermont preacher. Why did that sermon make him "feel good all over"? The answer is simple. In that sermon, Steinbeck met a God who cared enough to take him seriously, which began by looking at him honestly.

If I matter to God, then I have got to believe that all of me matters to God. If our relationship—God's and mine—is ever going to get off the ground, my sins cannot be glossed over. How can I trust a God I can fool? The day God ceases to be interested in my sin is, I fear, the day God will cease being interested in me. Were I to sin against my marriage and my wife were to say, "Don't even bother to tell me about it, Ritter. I don't care what you do. It doesn't matter anymore," what would be clear is that it would be me who no longer mattered anymore.

It is a terrible thing, my friends, to stand in danger of the wrath of God. But there may be one thing worse, and that is not to stand in the danger of the wrath of God. For the day God ceases to hold me up against my sin, I fear (perchance) that God will cease to hold me.

Week 3: What if It All Piles Up?

Ephesians 2:1-10

One semester at the University of California, a student began strolling around the campus in the nude. Eventually, he was arrested and sent home. "Yes, we are a bastion of free expression," the university said. "But first and foremost, we are a bastion of higher education."

Over the years, I have met my share of weirdos in the hallowed halls of ivy. But none of them ever came to class undressed, although it was once permissible to walk around “naked and unashamed.” I am speaking of Eden’s first pair, who strolled through the garden *au naturel* until late that first afternoon when God arrived and our beloved twosome both hid from God’s sight and covered themselves. Something about this fastdeteriorating situation no longer seemed as sweet and innocent as it had been before lunch, when Eve said, “How about a nice apple cobbler for dessert, my dear,” and Adam said, “It would be sinful, sweet Eve, lipsmackingly sinful.” In the Bible, being naked has more to do with being caught dead to rights than being caught with nothing in our closet.

The story is about sin: how easy to commit, how hard to deny. A father claims that his most vivid memory of raising children was when one of his offspring charged into the study and announced: “I didn’t do anything bad in the dining room.” Which led his father to ask: “And what bad thing in the dining room didn’t you do?” All of which led this wise father to observe that God must occasionally feel like asking us would-be innocents: “And precisely what bad thing is it, my children, that you didn’t do?” How is it that so many terrible things keep happening in the room next door, yet nobody seems to know how, why, or who did them?

That’s the paradox of human existence. Professing the best does not always keep us from performing at our worst. One of the reasons we appear naked before God in the late afternoon is that when we go to our closets, there are skeletons hanging where our clothes ought to be. Over time, these skeletons keep multiplying, because, over time, our sins reproduce. Sin begets sin. It’s the gynecology of corruption.

A fifth-grade boy steals a classmate’s radio. When confronted, he lies about the theft (“Who, me? I didn’t steal a radio”). When the radio is found in his locker, he lies about the motive (“I just wanted to see what size batteries it took”). When his motive is challenged, he lies about the lie (“I’m telling you the truth. What kind of teacher are you, if you don’t even believe a kid who tells the truth?”). When he is punished, he lets the air out of his teacher’s tires and beats up the safety patrol kid who catches him kneeling beside the teacher’s wheel.

As Cornelius Platinga Jr. explains: “Youngsters soon discover what the wise have known for millennia. People rarely commit single sins.” Which leads to the fear that as our moral slippages add up, their collective weight will drag us down.

I once referred (in a children’s sermon) to the possibility of posting sins on the refrigerator door. After all, we post everything else there. What if (in our growing up years) every defection, indiscretion, omission, or fall from grace was printed on a little yellow sticky note and attached to the refrigerator?

Billy’s sins for Wednesday:

- Forgot to feed cat
- Kicked cat
- Left milk glass in family room
- Blew off math assignment
- Was overheard using a four-letter word as a descriptive adjective for his sister

And if that wasn’t bad enough, what if Thursday’s sins were written out and attached to the bottom of the list from Wednesday? And what if Friday yielded its own list? Pretty soon there would be yellow sticky notes all over the refrigerator, with the paper trail of Billy’s sinfulness doubled back against itself for all the world to see. And how many weeks would it take before Billy’s sins would expand to cover the walls, the ceilings, the cabinet doors, and the closet where the canned goods are kept? Pretty soon Billy wouldn’t want to come into the kitchen anymore, and would take to eating most of

his meals out.

Make no mistake about it. When Paul talks about the “weight of sin,” he is talking about Billy and the accumulative burden of Billy’s record. What if it all piles up? What if none of it ever gets unstuck from the doors, walls, and closets of Billy’s life? What if it all stays there and screams at him, day after day, in a bitter chorus of condemnation? It is frightening to realize how much is remembered, recorded, posted on the refrigerator, or pinned to the fringes of our reputation. For good or ill, most of us go through life dragging our “tales” behind us. And even if we escape the weight of sin individually, we carry the burden of it culturally.

What if none of it ever gets put to rest? What if the sins of the fathers and the grandfathers, not to mention the forefathers, keep reappearing every generation? What if we have to keep making payments, over and over again, for sins committed in Europe over the centuries, in England three hundred years ago, in Africa two hundred years ago, in the American South and its war between the states, and in Germany of seventy years ago? Carlyle Marney asks, “What if all of this agony piles up, so that our children’s children have to keep suffering for atoning . . . for hurting . . . and dying for this mounting mound of moral stuff gone sour?”

What sense can we make out of all this tangled and troubled history? What will we do with this record of wrongs that is written on refrigerator doors; numbered in the chronicles of history; and kept alive in the collective memories of families, tribes, and nations? Will we ever get the problem fixed? The penance paid? The record expunged? The leftover eyes and teeth sorted out? The slate wiped clean? Or does it just get wider, deeper, and more burdensome by the day?

I can hear the prayer now: “O, for a means by which to wash it away.” This is precisely what our faith offers, you see: a means by which to wash it away. Our sins don’t have to keep piling up, getting higher and higher, deeper and deeper, greater and greater in number, hanging like paper chains across the walls and ceilings of our kitchens, or spilling into the third and fourth generations or our children’s children. Our sins don’t have to follow us to graduation day, dying day, or even judgment day; nor do they have to cling to us like barnacles on a boat’s bottom, burrs on a pant leg, or gravy stains on an expensive necktie.

Our sins can be washed away. The waters of baptism, the wine of Communion, or the blood of the cross can wash them away. Imagery? Of course it’s imagery. But grace-full imagery is always liquid imagery. Picture God’s mercy trickling on down, washing on down, or even flooding on down. Or if you don’t like that, picture the proverbial rain that falls on the just and the unjust. But remember that rain (biblically considered) is never considered to be a curse or an inconvenience, but a blessing and sign of grace. Or if you don’t like that, picture, in the words of a beloved spiritual, “peace like a river,” “love like an ocean,” or “joy like a fountain” in your soul.

“O happy day, O happy day, When Jesus washed my sins away!”

Week 4: O Do Remember Me

Psalm 25:1-7; Luke 23:39-43

The phone rang late one night and I answered by saying, “Bill Ritter speaking,” which was followed by another voice—higher, sweeter, and infinitely more teasing—saying: “I bet you don’t remember who this is.” I didn’t, and admitted I didn’t, which led to a second response: “I bet you don’t forget all the girls from your past.” And while I was still trying to figure out if I’d had a past—and if there were ever any unforgettable girls in it—she suddenly interrupted and asked who it was that I said I was upon answering the phone. She wasn’t looking for me at all, which left her feeling embarrassed and me feeling old.

But my title comes not from my telephone conversation, but from my text. It is that marvelous little plea found in Psalm 25:7 (RSV). “Remember not the sins of my youth, or my transgressions; according to thy steadfast love remember me . . . O LORD!” Actually, it is two phrases, juxtaposed

in counterpoint. “Forget my sins. But don’t forget me.”

As I look through the rearview mirror, my youth was more boring than sinful. But that’s not the way we picture things, “the sins of youth.” What do you see? Many of us see sleazy dives and smoky rooms; all-night binges followed by aching heads; toga parties and chugging beer; fraternity basements and the backseats of automobiles. We see road trips, beer runs, and descents into the hell of God only knows where. In short, we see *Animal House* recreated in every sleepy college town in North America. This may be true for some of the young folk some of the time but is certainly not true for all of the young folk all of the time.

“O Lord, remember not the sins of my youth,” not because they were among my worst, but because they were among my first. My sins, alas, have persisted. And my choices have not necessarily improved over time. My perversity leads me to seek my own way, swing to my own beat, and swim against the current of God’s will (not to mention the river of God’s righteousness). This leads me to recall the story of a man running frantically upstream beside a fast-flowing river. Someone called to him and asked, “Where are you going in such a hurry?” To which the man said, “My wife fell in the river and I’m trying to rescue her.” “But why are you running upstream?” the bystander asked. “If your wife fell in that water, you ought to be searching downstream,” which caused the husband to shout back, “You don’t know how contrary my wife is.”

Certainly God knows how contrary we are. And we know God knows. Hence, the cry: “Remember not the sins of my youth.” Translated into confessional language this reads: “Our sins are ever before us, and the remembrance of them is grievous unto us.”

Our initial petition, however, is far more personal. We wish that we could forget our sins. We wish that our past could be over and done with. But our past is never quite done with us. We are not the escape artists we pretend to be. In visiting with people pastorally, the most frequent suffering I encounter is suffering brought on by memory, which is usually well hidden. For while we fill our family rooms with the trophies, diplomas, brass rings, and blue ribbons that are the collective stuff of our good memories, we fill the corner closets of our souls with darker memories, drawn from those times in our lives when we were more deserving of chastisement than cheers.

Such things are difficult to forget, especially when one considers that those corner closets have direct pipelines, if not to our minds, then almost always to our digestive tracts. This is why guilt is an emotion often tasted before it is pondered. Besides, writes Henri Nouwen: “Burying our past is just another way of turning our backs on our best teacher.”

All of this leads to a second formation of the psalmist’s plea: “We wish, O God, that *others* could forget our sins.” But they don’t. They remember far too much for far too long. One of my colleagues recently attended his high school reunion. As the band was belting out oldies but goodies, a former female classmate came up to him and asked: “You weren’t seriously thinking about ministry when we were in high school, were you?” My friend admitted that the ministry hadn’t even crossed his mind in those years. “Good,” she said. “That certainly makes me feel better.” There’s always somebody, you see, who remembers what we did on Saturday nights—or during the rest of the week as well. It’s not so much that we keep finding our sins, but that the people who remember our sins keep finding us.

Our sins!
We wish that we could forget.
We wish that others could forget.
We wish that God could forget.

Does God have the memory of an elephant? If so, think of the pain that could cause us. Psalm 130:3 ponders: “If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who [among us] could stand?” (RSV).

A few years ago, I stumbled upon Paul Stucky’s recurring dream about divine judgment. In Paul’s dream, he is waiting in a long line (somewhat smugly) to have the content of his life reviewed by

God. In order to kill time while waiting, he strikes up a conversation with the lady standing just ahead of him. Much to his surprise, he finds he is talking to Mother Teresa. But that surprise is mild compared to the shock of overhearing God say to the saintly sister: "All things considered, Teresa, I was really expecting a lot more from you." I don't know about you, but if I was standing there, hearing God say that to her, I'd start looking for people wanting to cut the line, giving me additional time to reassess my response. Sure, God knows I could have done worse—but God also knows I could have done better. Much better.

Think how painful such knowledge must be for God. If God really knows all this stuff—I mean, if God really sees everything, misses nothing, and carries it all around in his head—God must suffer terribly. What if God has to carry around not only the sum total of yesterday's meanness and cruelties but also the collective memory of who did what to whom at Auschwitz, Antietam, Appomattox, Belfast, Bosnia, and Baghdad; proceeding alphabetically past Mogadishu and Nagasaki; clean on through to Waterloo and Zaire? Could you carry the memory of all that stuff? Or, sooner or later, would you have to forget it, if not for the sake of others, then for yours? Nobody, even God—especially God—wants to carry all that junk around forever.

"Remember not the sins of my youth. . . . [But] according to thy steadfast love remember me . . . O LORD!" That's what we really want, isn't it? Not just to have our sins forgotten, but to have ourselves remembered, so that in considering us God will feel no need to call for our file, but will simply call for us. Hanging beside him on the cross, one thief mocked Jesus. The other said: "Don't you fear God? We're getting what we deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." And then he said, "Jesus, remember me."

Remember me, not my sins. Our last and deepest prayer is that God will know us, in spite of all God knows about us, and that God will not turn his back on us, in spite of all that has come between us. For to be forgotten by God would be to be sentenced to the ultimate in homelessness, causing us to be numbered among the wild and wandering strays of the universe. Would God allow that to happen? Would God allow some to drift forever out of sight as a result of having been put forever out of mind? I think not, even as I pray not. For as a teenager who once knew fifty verses to the camp spiritual "Do Lord," it strikes me that I always sang the chorus with a smile on my face.

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