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St. Mary the Virgin, NYC

YEAR 2, PROPER 27, MONDAY: MASS TITUS 1:1-9; PSALM 24:1-6; LUKE 17:1-6

One of the teachings in the Western Church that's challenging for me is original sin, at least in the form generally discussed since the time of Augustine. Essentially, it speaks of a stain on humanity that traces its origin to the fall in Eden and includes some sense of guilt transmitted across generations since the beginning of humanity.

While inherited guilt isn't an aspect the Eastern Church ever really picked up on, the Greek fathers do write that we are all connected to Adam's disobedience. It isn't as well defined as in the Latin West, but includes some sort of a mystical connection between humanity and Adam, in that we are all wounded by his actions. The Greek fathers do describe a transmission across generations that connects us back to this event, though the details are vague.¹

That said, the Eastern Church doesn't ever take it as far as Augustine to the point that newborns are guilty of a sin they inherited from Adam.² That's also the part of Augustine I find difficult.

One of the ways to think about the Eastern perspective is that it's a way to talk about how we are all born with the propensity to sin. It's part of being human and always has been, since the time of Adam.

Another way I've been thinking about how there can be "transmission" across generations is that some effects of sin can be long lasting.

At Diocesan Convention this Saturday, Bp. Dietsche spoke about the sin of slavery within this diocese and how we've benefitted from it. The other side, of course, is that others were hurt by it.

Certainly, some of the racial problems we continue to have in America today have their roots slavery. More generally, I'm convinced there are sins today that can be connected through time to sins of the past.

¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 222-225; Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 350-351.

² Ware, 224.

To put it simply: sins committed by one person can lead to additional sins by someone else as a response. And then a cycle can begin, with the effects continuing on and on past that first sin, being transmitted across time.

In today's gospel lesson from Luke, we hear the word sin four times. Looking at the Greek text, there are actually two different words or families of words.³ All of them can be translated as "sin", though if we return to the original Greek, there are some differences.

Jesus says, "Temptations to sin are sure to come" and speaks of the consequences of causing "one of these little ones to sin." These instances of the word sin are based on words related to the modern English word scandal.

In antiquity, a σκάνδαλον, in its most concrete sense, was a trap for catching something. It also could indicate more abstract concepts as temptation or fault.⁴ The word carries with it a sense of culpability for what comes next: a sin that's a trap or temptation and leads to somebody else's sin.

Our next examples are from a family of our most common biblical words for sin. Nevertheless, the verb ἀμαρτάνω, in its most basic sense, was used in ancient times to convey the idea of missing the mark.⁵ Think of a bow and arrow that misses the bull's-eye. We ought to try again and aim a little better next time.

Overall, our translation lacks these nuances that help focus us in on sin being something we do, when we miss the mark, but also, how it can entrap others, leading them into sin.

Putting this together, I'm imagining sin as something snowballing over time, getting bigger and bigger, ever since Eve fell for the trap set by that serpent and Adam followed her down that path, missing the mark and also eating the fruit.⁶

How can we break the cycle? Stop sin in its tracks?

³ σκάνδαλα, σκανδαλίση, ἀμάρτη, ἀμαρτήση

⁴ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 926.

⁵ Ibid, 49.

⁶ Genesis 3

As we heard in the Collect of the Day, God sent his Son into the world to “destroy the works of the devil”.⁷ To break the cycle.

And a message the Son brought with him is forgiveness. Even “seven times in the day,” we just heard. “Seven times” in that that we need to do it as much as is necessary. By saying, “in the day,” Jesus is reinforcing that we ought to be mindful of this always. Daily.

Of course, on hearing this expectation, the apostles ask the Lord to increase their faith. But, Jesus responds that even faith the size of a tiny mustard seed is more than enough.

To do this, we only have to have faith in perhaps the most fundamental of the Church’s teachings: God is love and also forgives us.

✠ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

⁷ *Book of Common Prayer*, 236.