Remember Your Baptism

By Julian Forth
October 9, 2022

Texts: (For full texts, go to the end of this manuscript)
 2 Kings 5:1-15
 Luke 17:11-19

Here is the Zoom link to Jay’s teaching: <https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/share/kS8HYqzEdZfIUp4rhRKE0vXUndaBfOJioGRVl9XOwfSmxZp8UOJnXTEnOFbunHez.mwMLvYxGeB4j9uxi?startTime=1665326569000>

I find that it’s not popular in progressive Christian spaces to speak about sin. It’s a word that comes with a lot of baggage. Sin is a word that is used to shame, oppress, and judge. I think for example of the way “sin” is deployed against queer and trans people to twist pleasure into guilt and bodies into shame. I think of how sin has been used to induce guilt — petrifying, crushing guilt. I think of how sin is used to foster self-hatred and justify authoritarian disciplinary measures to create submissive subjects.

But I’m not ready to throw “Sin” out yet, because if we give up on the concept of sin, I fear we might lose an important religious framework for naming the evils and violence that plague our work. In the Western church, Sin is often understood in legal terms: breaking a law, committing a crime, wrongdoing in need of punishment. In this framework, salvation means to be saved *from* impending punishment or *from* the consequences of one’s actions. However, the Eastern churches (in general) have a very different concept of Sin. The 4th century Church bishop, Athanasius of Alexandria wrote a work called *On the Incarnation* that I think can be helpful here. In this short work, Athanasius illustrates a more Eastern concept of sin–and of salvation. He writes:

For as, when the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from without, the one whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood: for, for the sake of their picture, even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the outline is renewed upon it; in the same way also the most holy Son of the Father, being the Image of the Father, came to our region to renew humankind once made in His likeness, and find them, as one lost, by the remission of sins;

In Athanasius’s time, obviously there were no digital pictures and no photography. Portraits were composed by the meticulous process of painting while the model stood still for hours. Athanasius likens humans to being an image — a portrait in the likeness of God. However, the surfaces of this image have been marred by strains and blotches. For Athanasius, Sin is this disfigurement of the beautiful artwork of human life. Being so marked, the Son of God — the Model in whose likeness we are painted — comes once again to sit so that God, the Artist, can restore the beauty of our humanity. Not to destroy us or condemn us because “even the mere wood on which [the portrait] is painted is not thrown away;” instead, it is to renew the art that is our human life.

Athanasius is not thinking about individual sins. He is not talking about numbers of sins. And, even more, he is *not* talking about punishment or retribution for our failings. Sin — singular and all-encompassingly — is what affects us as whole. Maybe, then, we should think of Sin a little differently. Sin, not as our individual sins but our collective entanglement in patterns that harm each other. Sin, not my sins or your sins, but the Sin that seems to lead our best efforts astray. Sin, not as my self-hatred, but my honest assessment of our networks of violence and our position within them. Sin is what makes us a little less human.

Salvation, then, is not about avoiding imminent punishment or even earning a reward. Instead, salvation is a matter of renewal and regeneration. Salvation is being made well. Salvation is the work of an Artist, and it is beautiful. Salvation is being restored to the fullness of who we are. After all, isn’t this the image of salvation we see in the story in our Gospel passage?

In Luke, Jesus walks through border lands — a place where boundaries are blurred and where different people who are normally kept separate might happen to bump into each other. When he enters a village, he encounters ten people suffering from leprosy. They keep their distance but cry out from afar “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” This is not a cry of guilt, fear of punishment, or a burdened conscience. This is a request to be cured of their ailment. Jesus directs them to go and to show themselves to the priest. They do so and, upon seeing that they are healed, one returns to Jesus and falls down thanking him. Jesus tells that one “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.”

Sin is simply the ways in which we are unwell. Salvation is being made well — individually and collectively — that is, Salvation means being healed. This is what the Gospels understood so well (that’s why there are so many stories of healing in them). This is what is meant by healing, and this is what Athanasius understood so well.

However, reading Athanasius’s words today, I would take this concept one step further: Does God redeem humans only? What about non-humans? What about soil that has become unusable? What about the habitats and animal life destroyed by deforestation or waste? What about the air made unbreathable and emissions that are heating our planet? If God is truly working to make all things new, that includes the cacophony of non-human lives, ecosystems, environments in which we’re embedded. To be clear, Athanasius knew this. The church has always known this. I think especially of St Francis who knew this very well in his *Canticle of the Sun*. In St Francis’s song, he praises the Sun, Moon, stars, wind, fire, water, herbs, animals, and even death as our very Brothers and Sisters. Salvation has always been understood as a New Creation.

Turning to the story of Namaan through the eyes of the Gospel, we see here, like in the Luke passage, an image of sickness and healing. However, when I read this story of Namaan, I couldn’t help but remember the sacrament of baptism — the sign of our salvation. Namaan’s story is of one who is deeply sick, terribly unwell, yet he found healing in the water of Jordan. Of course, this story is not about baptism. However, I invite us to reflect on the sacrament of baptism through the story of Namaan. Just as Namaan was washed in water and made well, for Christians, baptism is a sacrament of God’s healing work. In Genesis, just as God drew creation out of the watery abyss; in our Scripture reading today, Namaan is brought out of the river of Jordan made well; also in baptism, we are born into the New Creation that our Mother God is birthing among us.

Even though baptism takes on multiple interpretations across the different branches of Christianity, in baptism, water stands as a vital element of our faith — personally, communally, and historically. For Namaan as for us, water is a sign of our being healing. For Namaan as for us, water makes us well. However, in our time, water has become both threatened by and threatening to human life. This Sunday during the liturgical season of Creation, I invite us to think about water.

You might recall that for years now American Indian communities in the Dakotas have been fighting against the oil pipelines being built through their lands. They know the threat that oil spills and leaks pose to their water and to the health of their community. Their rallying cry, “Water is Life,” is a simple and beautiful reminder of our planetary entanglement. Human life is entangled with the water.

I invite us to consider water because we know that the predominantly black city of Flint, Michigan still does not have healthy, drinkable water and, as of recently, neither does Jackson, Mississippi. We know that in California, wildfires have increased and air quality has decreased from a lack of water. We also know of the record-breaking floods in Pakistan caused by torrential rains and melting glaciers. Water crisscrosses our cells, our soils, and food and connects us to each other across the globe. Yet, in our time water is privatized by corporations like Nestle and CocaCola; water is polluted by oil and fracking; and, due to climate change, some areas suffer increasing drought while others face rising sea levels. In our time, water has become both threatened by pollution and scarcity and threatening in the form of floods and becoming undrinkable. Looking at the miserable conditions of our waters: Isn’t this Sin? Isn’t this a world stained by disfiguring marks? Isn’t our world a gorgeous artwork in need of renewal?

Our world needs healing. Our planet is in need of renewal and regeneration. The consequences of carbon emissions and deforestation are growing clearer every day in the real impacts of climate change. As Dorothee Soelle wrote:

No one can feel at home in a world that has to be bought and used up. We ourselves as well as the environment are damaged by consumerism; it dulls the senses so that people no longer know how to smell, taste, feel, and see.

However, the healing that our world needs is more individual acts or a matter of consumerism. In a recent email from *The Festival Center*, Bill Mefford quotes Chico Mendes by stating “environmentalism without class struggle is gardening.” This statement recognizes that the cause and the consequences of climate change are unevenly distributed. It is overwhelmingly the case that impoverished communities, black and brown communities, and populations of the Global South stand to suffer the most from increased droughts or from flooding, from harmful policies and from loss of livable habitats. Moreover, the same industries driving climate change are also deeply connected to the active impoverishment of low-income communities at home and abroad. *The Sin from which our planet suffers is capitalism, and the healing to which we are called is the work of class struggle.*That is, renewal and healing require working alongside working-class folks and dispossessed communities to oppose the profit-making industries that disfigure the work of art we call our common home.

This Sunday let us remember our baptism, not as a sign of our individual salvation but as a sign of God’s healing work in creation. In baptism, we remember our Sister Water, and all who depend on her, who is sick and suffers today. In baptism, we remember that we are healed and we are called to participate in the healing work our world so desperately needs.

Amen.

Texts:

**2 Kings 5:1-15** Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favour with his master, because by him the Lord had given victory to Aram. The man, though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman’s wife. She said to her mistress, ‘If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.’ So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, ‘Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel.’ He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, ‘When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy.’ When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, ‘Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me.’ But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, ‘Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel.’ So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha’s house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, ‘Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean.’ But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, ‘I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?’ He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, ‘Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, “Wash, and be clean”?’ So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, ‘Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant.’

**Luke 17:11-19** On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, ‘Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!’ When he saw them, he said to them, ‘Go and show yourselves to the priests.’ And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?’ Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’