

Prone to Wander

As we continue our time in Paul's letter to the Romans, we wade deeper into his understanding of what exactly God was up to in Jesus. I think it helps to remember that Paul is writing not to a generic church (as if there is such a thing), but to a particular community. While Paul lives his entire life under the thumb of the Roman Empire, here he writes to a church that gathers and worships under the emperor's nose. This band of believers is worshiping and growing not in a protected or isolated outpost, but in the thick of power and oppression. They are daring to profess that Jesus is Lord, which means Caesar is not. It is also a community that includes Jewish followers of Jesus as well as Gentiles, a community that is still figuring out what following this Jesus means. So it is a sympathetic audience, a group of people to be admired and encouraged, which Paul is eager to do, but he is also determined to talk about sin. Yes, sin. Everybody's favorite topic. Ok, sin is actually nobody's favorite topic unless you are the Church Lady or a pulpit pounding preacher or a melodramatic televangelist. Here's my big chance!

We quote Paul in here every Sunday: "all have sinned and fall short." All means all. But it is tempting to say those words with our fingers crossed, to think, "Well, sure, but my sin isn't so bad compared to ..." But Paul doesn't make distinctions. All means all. He's writing to this community of Gentiles, non-Jewish Christians with maybe a few Jewish Christians mixed in. And he wants to make it abundantly clear that each and every one of them is a sinner. Goodness, Paul. What a way to introduce yourself to perfect strangers, especially strangers you want to encourage! But what exactly have they done to be given such a title, to be called sinners? What have we done to be lumped in with them? After all we're decent enough. We pay our bills and stop at stop signs and mind our manners and mow our grass. We say "please" and "thank you." We go to church and vote and head back in to the store when we realize that we forgot to pay for the deli turkey that was hidden under the car seat in the grocery cart. We don't lie—at least not big ones. We don't cheat, except maybe occasionally at Monopoly. But those aren't really all that bad, right? Those little slip ups don't really make us sinners, do they?

For three consecutive summers as a child, I spent three days each week for six weeks on the Elams' farm near Franklin, Tennessee at Country Day Camp. I got to ride my favorite pony, Star. I learned how to row and canoe and even sail, sort of, on a small lake. I made crafts and sang songs and played games and learned how to use a bow and arrow at archery. I loved archery. The counselor was kind and patient, and I managed to be an ok archer, at least when competing against other third, fourth, and fifth grade girls. There was something so satisfying when the arrow pierced the target, something so exhilarating about pulling the arrow back out after confirming that it had actually reached the bullseye, even if it was on the line between the red and the gold. That still counted. That was still good enough. It wasn't quite as much fun to search for the arrows that landed somewhere else, looking intently in tall grass for a sign of those bright little feathers. It wasn't much fun to miss the mark, but it happened often enough, so I got as good at finding those arrows as I was at pulling arrows from the bullseye. Because even with practice, there were still a healthy number that missed the mark and landed in the grass.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the root of the word for sin speaks of missing the mark, "to wander from the law of God."¹ "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it," the hymn says.² Yes. We try. We practice. We pray. And yet, we are prone to wander, inclined to go our own way. The Reformers spoke of a notion of total depravity. It sounds awful, like the worst moments of the most frightening horror movies, but it's much more subtle than that, and maybe more frightening in a way. To be totally depraved means that everything we do, everything we are is tinged with self-interest. It does not mean we are worthless. Nor does it mean that we are beyond hope. It means that we fall short of all that God intends in what we do and in what we fail to do. It means that this wandering, this missing-the-mark seeps into every aspect of our lives as individuals and as a community.

Over the past few months I have been in conversations around race and racism in the nation and in our own backyard. Some of you have joined me as we have sat at table and had our eyes opened to the ways racism has worked its way into our very fabric, ways that I often fail to see. I was born the year Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. I was raised in the supposedly post-Jim Crow south. Growing up, in what I now realize was

¹ <https://biblehub.com/greek/264.htm>

² "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing," *Glory to God*, #475

quite a privileged and naïve bubble, I thought our struggles with racism were done in the South, and for some reason I never thought it was much of a problem above the Mason-Dixon Line. But then I gathered with African American friends in Harrisburg a few summers ago, who were weeping and terrified for their husbands' and brothers' lives in response to the killing of Philando Castile in Minnesota and the shooting of Michael Brown in Missouri. One friend spoke about her husband's decision to keep his wallet in the cup holder rather than the glove compartment so that when—not if, but when—he was pulled over, he could safely retrieve his license and registration. A Black clergy colleague recounted how she was followed closely by a police officer from Lemoyne to Harrisburg as she drove to one of our Chat & Chew events at a church. Even 60 years after the Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the Supreme Court our nation's schools are still decidedly separate and unequal. The effects of redlining neighborhoods are still ever-present. And our prison system incarcerates an inordinately higher percentage of African Americans than white Americans. According to one report:

In 2017, blacks represented 12% of the U.S. adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population. Whites accounted for 64% of [the adult population] but 30% of prisoners.³

Mosques and synagogues are hiring armed guards to protect them as they worship. And the Ku Klux Klan left fliers in neighborhoods in Carlisle in February of this year.⁴ Beloved children of God are being threatened, written off, and killed by other beloved children of God. I cannot imagine how humanity could miss the mark any more. I cannot imagine how much farther we could wander if we tried.

Now I am certain that no one I know distributed the fliers. I want to believe that everyone is good and kind and decent at their core. I like to think I am, too, and yet this reality is not a made-for-TV movie or an exaggerated Hollywood script. This land I love, this nation of which I am a citizen, the community of which I am a member is still battling the sin of racism, falling well short of who God has created us to be, missing the mark of God's beloved community. So now what? I can respond defensively, insisting that I am not racist, that I have good friends who are black or Jewish or Muslim, or I can confess that the system is broken and that I have

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/30/shrinking-gap-between-number-of-blacks-and-whites-in-prison/>

⁴ <https://www.pennlive.com/news/2019/02/ku-klux-klan-fliers-distributed-in-carlisle.html>

not done what I can to see it or confront it. I can lament the damage done, I can listen to those who are still reeling under its weight, and I can ask forgiveness for the ways I have fallen and still fall short.

But that is not all. That is not the end. Because for all of his talk of sin, Paul does not want me—or us—to wallow in our sinfulness. He does not want to bash us into feeling guilty, for us to give up and walk away. Yes, the first step is acknowledging that I, that we fall short of who God creates and calls us to be, but that recognition goes hand in hand with the next: hearing the amazing, great good news that yes, all have sinned, all—white, black, brown, gay, straight, old, young, moderate, progressive, conservative—have fallen short, “But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”⁵ *While we were sinners*, in the midst of humanity’s missing the mark, in the thick of our wandering away, in the face of our turning our backs on God and one another, God chooses to give us Jesus, to send us God’s own only Son to save us. God did not wait for humanity to get its act together. God did not insist that we be perfect in order to receive this gift. While the entire human race was weak, broken, embattled and estranged from all that God calls us to do and all that God hopes for us to be, God gave us his own heart to make things right in ours. Grace is not just a nice idea. God’s grace is a radically restorative power and gift that changes us. Grace changes everything.

Racism is not the only sin woven into the fabric of our nation and our communities. Fear-mongering, disdain, apathy, greed, cynicism, hatred, and everyday meanness have a stubborn grip our common life, too. I am guilty of all of those and more, and I am guilty of wanting to ignore or overlook the sin and go on my merry way. Perhaps you are, too. The truth is that we are all prone to wander; we all miss the mark. But Jesus comes to save sinners, to restore the broken, to make things right, to bring an end to our stubborn ways, and lead us into new life, no matter how many times we wander, no matter how far off the mark we may be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Romans 5:8, CEB