

***“Verdict: Guilty! (but pardoned)”***

***Romans 3:21-28, I John 1:5-10***

***August 4, 2024***

***Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut***

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I was the nightmare that every parent dreams about with a teen driver in the house. In my first nine months of driving, I was involved in three traffic accidents. The first two were minor but the last was major. At 17 years old, I rear-ended another vehicle. This last accident required me to go to court, because in Maryland state law in 1971 there was not any no-fault insurance. Since there was no police officer or witness at the accident, we had to go to court to determine who was at fault and whose insurance company would pay.

Now, there may not have been a police officer at the scene, but my father was a law enforcement professional. His experience, and the circumstances of the accident, made the guilty party pretty clear. So when our case was called and the judge asked me my plea, I replied “Guilty.” Because I was.

After gathering the facts from the plaintiff and myself, the judge rendered his verdict: guilty-but pardoned. He didn’t say it quite that way. He said, *“I find you guilty and the penalty will be for you to pay the costs of the court.”* In 1971 that was – wait for it - \$5.

Lest anyone think that there were no consequences for me, you should know that later my father got a letter from our insurance company. They said I could continue on his policy and his rates would go up 50%. Or I could send proof that I had turned in my driver’s license. You can guess which happened.

But the point is that in that court of law the circumstances were changed. I was guilty: but pardoned! The judge’s verdict was not an invitation to negotiation or to discuss the finer points of jurisprudence. Oh no! It was a declaration of an altered circumstance in which I now found myself.

Spiritually speaking, this is true of all of us. We are recipients of God’s verdict: guilty, but pardoned! *“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”* Paul reminded us in today’s reading from Romans. Yet we are saved through grace by faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet we sometimes cannot believe this altered state of affairs. We cannot believe that sin has lost and love is victorious. Consider the case of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Hiroo Onoda of the Imperial Japanese Army during World War II. In 1944, at age 23, he was commissioned to fight using guerilla tactics on the island of Lubang in the Philippines. He was told to neither surrender nor kill himself. His full story can be found in a “Google” search. As part of a special operations unit using guerilla tactics, he continued to fight nearly 29 years after the war was over. Only when his former commander, Major Taniguchi, came to him and told him that the war was over would he believe. Listen to what Lt. Onoda wrote of that encounter and consider, as I read it, if we are still carrying the burden of sin. Speaking of himself and his former comrades, Lt. Onoda wrote in his 1974 book No Surrender: My Thirty Year War:

*I eased off the pack that I always carried with me and laid the gun on top of it. Would I really have no more use for this rifle that I had polished and cared for like a baby all these years? Or Kozuka’s rifle, which I had hidden in a crevice in the rocks? Had the war really ended thirty years ago? If it had, what had Shimada and Kozuka died for? If what was happening was true, wouldn’t it have been better if I had died with them?*

So what is “sin,” this pack some of us carry, this rock that weighs us down? Biblically, it is two things. First, it is alienation from God and neighbor. That is why Jesus answered his questioner about the greatest commandments being love of God and neighbor. Sin is alienation from these two significant relationships. Second, sin is missing the mark of our high calling in Christ. The word in the Greek New Testament means “missing the mark,” an archer’s term for missing the bull’s eye.

We have lost the use of the word “sin.” We don’t hear it that often in worship and even less so in our cultural vocabulary. We sometimes speak of it in ways that are less clear, to ease our conscience or under some effort to avoid being unkind. Yet as we heard from I John, *“If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”*

Our reluctance to admit our sin can be expressed in many ways, but I’d like to focus on two. The first is self-righteousness. Like the religious leaders with whom Jesus had conflict, we sometimes measure ourselves rather than letting God do the measuring. And if we measure ourselves

by looking around for someone who isn't quite as good....well, then we look better, don't we?

Problem is, we lose our bearings when we look to others instead of God in Jesus Christ, the light of the world. The old hymn, "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me" speaks to where our focus needs to be:

*Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea,  
Unknown waves before me roll, hiding rock and treacherous shoal,  
Chart and compass come from Thee: Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*

It's easy to run aground when we lose sight of God as the ruler and guide of our lives. You may have heard the story of the ship's captain who saw a light on the horizon at night. He said to his first mate: "Semaphore that ship and tell him to move 15 degrees starboard." The semaphore was sent and back came the light, flashing, "**You** move 15 degree starboard." The captain really got irritated at this and told his first mate to send the message again, "You move 15 degrees starboard, and sign it 'Captain Jones of the United States Navy.'" So the message was sent and the light on the horizon flashed back "**You** move 15 degrees starboard, signed 'Seaman Smith of the United States Coast Guard.'" Now the captain was absolutely furious that some upstart coast guard cutter and some insubordinate enlisted man was in the way of a ship and captain of the United States Navy. He said to his first mate: "I'm going to have that man court-martialed. You semaphore him again "Move 15 degrees starboard immediately, signed Captain Jones of the United States Navy and the aircraft carrier Enterprise.'" After a pause the light on the horizon flashed one last time: "You move 15 degrees starboard, signed Seaman Smith of the United States Coast Guard and the Montauk Lighthouse." So our reluctance to admit the error of sin can be found in self-righteousness.

A second response to sin is guilt. We feel guilty. We try to make up for those sins which alienate or separate us. Do not misunderstand. I am not speaking of atonement or restitution, acts which are important in our courts and in our lives to restore relationships. I am speaking rather of a guilt that becomes a way of serving ourselves. We say to God, or others, or both, "I tried so hard. I'm really trying to change. I'm really trying to do what I'm supposed to do."

Here's the problem. (Stand with glasses in hand, away from the body, and hold them there.) Do you see what I'm doing now? I'm **trying** to put my glasses on. And as long as I can hold them out there, I can stand here all morning and **try** to put my glasses on. And as long as I'm **trying** to put my glasses on, I don't have to **put** my glasses on! I can always tell you: "*Don't you see I'm trying to put my glasses on?*" And as long as I try, I don't have to do. Guilt, and trying, can immobilize us to the very changes we need to end the struggle with sin. As Yoda said so succinctly in "The Empire Strikes Back:" "*Try not. Do...or do not. There is no try.*"

How then do we experience the "pardon" part of our verdict? First, we can hear again the simplicity of the Gospel message: "God loves us." The reason love is spoken here is because Christ first loved us. Dr. Karl Barth was one of the greatest theologians of the last century. He stood against the Nazis when they tried to compromise the German church with Nazi values and loyalty oaths. He, along with Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was martyred by the Nazis, led the opposition with their 1934 Barmen Declaration. Best known for his expansive theological book, Church Dogmatics, Dr. Barth was once asked to summarize the millions of words in that voluminous work. He thought for a moment and famously replied, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" We experience the pardon in our guilty verdict through a person, Jesus Christ.

Second, we experience pardon when we **do** something. The church has a word for it: "repentance," in the Greek, *metanoia*, literally, to turn around. A 180-degree turn. A radical change. A turn away from sin and toward God. Methodism's founder, the Rev. John Wesley, once received a long letter from one of his preachers, lamenting all the difficulties of his parish and people. Mr. Wesley is reported to have replied with a single sentence: "*You look inward too much, and upward too little.*" Repenting, changing, is about looking up to God in Christ.

Last, we receive pardon when we realize that reconciliation is ours for the asking and for the living. It's what the Lord's Prayer means when we pray "*forgive us our trespasses **as we forgive** those who trespass against us.*" Pardon, reconciliation, is coming home: coming to our true home in God. The Hebrew people had a special year for it, called the

Year of Jubilee. Once every 50 years, people didn't have to plant. They left their fields and went to the home of their upbringing. The family gathered as a large, extended family once again. Debts were forgiven and slaves were given their freedom.

Charles Wesley, John's brother, wrote the hymn we are about to sing, a hymn about the Year of Jubilee, the year of reconciliation and pardon and freedom. I'm told this church doesn't know it. Perhaps there's been a misunderstanding that it can only be sung every 50 years! Here's the really good news: hymn or no hymn, we don't have to wait 50 years for the Year of Jubilee. Every year, month, week and day, we can be reconciled and restored! Whether we come to the throne of grace and the table of our Lord today in body or spirit or both, know that the year of Jubilee is now! God's pardon is poured out for you and me now! God welcomes us home now! So let us sing the triumphant strains:

*"Blow ye the trumpet, blow! The gladly solemn sound  
let all the nations know, to earth's remotest bound:  
The year of jubilee is come! The year of jubilee is come!  
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home."*