

Story and Meditation: Does Sin Die?

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 6:1b-11

by *Eric Anderson*

When you're an 'elepaio, there are things you don't talk about.

I'm not talking about the usual things, like where do eggs come from (they come from chickens, right?) or why does the rain fall (because water doesn't stand up very well). I'm talking about the serious questions, the questions that make a difference, like:

What makes a good koa tree?

The 'elepaio don't talk about that.

They all know, of course. They know because when a koa tree is good, they come to perch on it. They also perch on a koa tree that's not so good, of course. They just do different things on it. The canoe builders of old Hawai'i came to recognize that the 'elepaio could tell which fallen koa trunks had been infested by burrowing insects and which were still uneaten, filled with good wood. The curious 'elepaio would follow them, then perch on the fallen log.

"Ua 'elepaio 'ia ka wa'a," they said. "The 'elepaio marks the canoe." If the birds pecked at the koa tree, it was no good. The insects had taken it. If they paused a moment and flew somewhere else, then the wood was sound, and it could be used for a strong canoe.

The 'elepaio, however, don't talk about how they know the one log from the other, and they're not telling.

Of course, they also don't tell people that they've got it backwards. The good logs, as far as the 'elepaio are concerned, are the ones filled with bugs. Because that's food. I suppose if they were interested in traveling the oceans they might favor the canoes more, but for now, they prefer knowing where their dinner is coming from.

But they don't talk about the difference between what's good and what's bad.

That can be a problem for an 'elepaio who doesn't learn well from watching the other birds.

It can be a big problem for people who don't hear clearly the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, virtue and sin.

There are expressions of Christianity that spend a lot of time with sin. They speak against it the way some people advise voting: early and often. They may focus on the minutiae of sinning. They may identify certain behaviors as sinful. They may warn against the consequences. They may even pronounce certain acts, and even certain people, as utterly depraved and beyond forgiveness or redemption.

There are other expressions of Christianity that do not spend much time with sin at all. They may emphasize the goodness of the created universe. They may explain injurious actions as the result of ignorance or error. They may look toward the wide-open love of God as a source for a sweeping grace and renewal. They may even decide that people are no longer enslaved by sin, that sin has died within them, and that whatever they do from here on must be all right – or at least such a minor error as to be easily overlooked.

But does sin die?

My guess is that these descriptions have conjured up some images for you of people that you know or have read about or have heard speak. You may have some descriptive words that you'd apply to each: conservative, perhaps, to the people who speak of sin often, and liberal or progressive to the people who do not.

I have observed, however, that both conservatives and liberals can get very excited about sin. It just depends on what sin you're talking about. For some in these days, the question of abortion defines sin, and other sins get disregarded or discounted – and it happens this way for those who would ban abortion and for those who demand its availability. If somebody supports my position, I am inclined to overlook concerns I would think very important in someone else.

If someone opposes my position, of course, those same concerns confirm my view of their total depravity.

That's one of the reasons we can't just ignore the issue of sin. Our branch of Christianity, by and large, for better and for worse, tends to let the topic of sin alone, or at least we leave the word alone. Mind you, there are sins we get very concerned about indeed: racism and sexism, damage to the environment, physical violence among them. We may be reluctant to call them sin, however.

If abandon the word, if we abandon the concept of sin, we lose something important. If we don't sin, we apologize very badly. If we don't sin, we don't make things right; we don't make restitution. If we don't sin, we probably won't change our behavior in the future.

We don't tolerate that in a five year old. Why do we tolerate it in ourselves?

We may also be reluctant to take a close look at ourselves, at our institutions, and at our communities for their involvement in sin. When a society works pretty well for us, we tend to assume that it does for everybody else. I mean, why wouldn't it? This reluctance led to the

famous statement of Brazil's Archbishop Helder Camara, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

The failure to look closely, the acceptance of the status quo, has perpetuated the oppressive systems that we condemn. To take just one example: there is a larger number of women serving in the United States Congress today – both House and Senate – than at any other time in history. Before we feel too good about that, however, let's look at those numbers. There are 26 female Senators – just over one quarter. There are 101 Congresswomen. That's less than a quarter. 50.8% of the US population, by the way, are women.

Let's just say that's it's not a very representative House.

Hawaii's legislature looks better, but don't get too excited. A third of the Representatives are women. 28% of the State Senators are women. There's a real spike of serving women in Generation X, with more female Representatives in that age group than men – although not in the Senate. I find it really depressing to observe that the number of women elected in the Millennial Generation is much lower than the men.

Well.

Listen to these words: "A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

"A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth. With righteous indignation, it will look across the seas and see individual capitalists of the West investing huge sums of money in Asia, Africa, and South America, only to take the profits out with no concern for the social betterment of the countries, and say, 'This is not just.' It will look at our alliance with the landed gentry of South America and say, 'This is not just.' The Western arrogance of feeling that it has everything to teach others and nothing to learn from them is not just."

The person who said those words was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his famous 1967 address at Riverside Church in New York. If you doubt the persistence of sin, reflect on the fact that that was over fifty years ago and it is easy to hear it as reflecting on our circumstances today.

To answer the question placed in the title of this sermon, "Does sin die?" the answer clearly must be, "No."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "We know that our old self was crucified with [Christ] so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." If he had meant by that that accepting the grace of Christ conferred a sudden immunity to sin, I would have to say he was simply and purely wrong. His letters, however, display great familiarity with the capacity of Christians to sin. Mostly, being Paul, he describes the way it happens in other people. Occasionally, also being Paul, he observes it and comments on it in himself. Not far away in this same letter he writes, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

So it is for me. So it is, I would guess, for all of us.

Sin is not dead. It is not dead within us as individuals. Sin lies beneath the structures of our institutions (including the church) and warps our best intentions. Sin is the foundation of some of the basic assumptions of our culture.

We dare not ignore it. We dare not disregard it. We dare not dismiss it. When we do, real evil harms real people. Real injustices go unchecked. Real power shrugs off real accountability. We really cause harm ourselves, our own individual selves, if we do not examine our actions. We fail to make apologies. We fail to make restitution. We fail to make change.

The 'elepaio can leave unexamined the ways it knows the good from the bad.

We must not.

Amen.