



February 21, 2010 *What's so Deadly about Sin?*
Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

Once upon a time, an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in his village. "I want to ask you something," the hunter said. "What's that?" the missionary replied. "If I did not know about God and sin" the hunter said, "would I go to hell?" "No," the missionary said, "not if you did not know." "Then why," asked the hunter, "did you tell me?"

Most of us don't need a preacher or a priest or a pastor to tell us about sin. Long before there were religious leaders to whom we could make our confessions or bring our sacrifices or recite our Hail Mary's – there was and always has been human experiences of brokenness and alienation. From snitching a cookie off the plate when mother isn't looking, to cheating on our income taxes, to infidelities committed between the sheets, we are well aware of what it means to do wrong. So why is it that we have such a problem talking about sin and what is it about sin that is really so deadly?

This week, amidst all the hoopla and hype of Olympic medals won and lost, ice machine breakdowns and ticket refunds – there was one other sports story that managed to steal the headlines – the 13 ½ minute internationally televised apology of Tiger Woods.

In the commentary that followed Tiger's public display of contrition there was lots of speculation about whether he was sincere or not; whether we should forgive him or not; and perhaps most importantly whether we'll see him on the golf course this season or not. But for me what lingers from his apology is not the immoral acts he clearly engaged in and whether or not his intentions were true in the words that he spoke. What lingers for me is the look on his mother's face as she sat through what clearly must have been one of the most difficult moments of her life – it was the look of a woman whose relationship with her son had been severely damaged -- and one can't help but wonder if Tiger's wife Elin and all the women with whom he allegedly slept with had also been present at the press conference – if their faces would also have revealed the depth of brokenness they too must be feeling in relationship to this iconic figure.

However it comes about in our lives, whether we are victims or perpetrators, whether we are complicit or intentional in our behaviours or omissions—at its core sin is about relationships gone wrong – relationships with one another, relationships with ourselves, relationships with God, relationships with the created order and with creation itself. What makes sin deadly is not so much the activity of sinning itself -- but rather the failure to acknowledge it and to do something about it.

This Sunday marks the beginning of the season of Lent – the 40 days and 6 Sundays leading up to the celebration of Easter. Traditionally in the church, Lent has been a season of confession. In the best of what that has been, lent has offered an opportunity for people's behaviour to change and be changed for the better. It's been a time for experiencing divine love and divine grace.

But in the worst of what that's been, Lent has been a time for making us so aware of our shortcomings, we can barely remember what's good about ourselves. And that, combined with

the increasing awareness in recent times that religious leaders have committed some serious sins of their own, has left many wondering if Lent has any relevance or spiritual significance for our lives.

To make matters worse, over the centuries, the story that has come to be associated with sin and therefore with Lent, the story of Adam and Eve, has also undergone some serious distortion, making it a story reviled by many and revered by few.

So its time to give sin a second look.

The first thing to notice about sin is that although we may think it originates with the story of Adam and Eve, the word sin never actually appears in the story, let alone the phrase “original sin.” It was actually Augustine of Hippo who first coined the phrase “original sin.” It happened in the 4th century when Augustine used the story of Adam and Eve to explain our human tendency to choose evil over good. Ever since then, when most of us think of sin, what we think about is primarily individual disobedience.

And yet the Hebrew Bible actually uses three different words to describe what is essentially alienation from God. The first word comes from the root “chatah” meaning to miss the mark. It describes those times in our lives when we don’t necessarily set out to do wrong, but despite our best intentions wrongdoing ensues. For example, I don’t intend to harm the planet every time I pull my car out of the driveway each morning, but the end result of my driving is pollution that harms.

The second Hebrew word for sin is “avah” which means to act wrongly. This one does involve wrong intent, like the occasions we speak ill of someone hoping that we can tarnish their reputation. In the Bible, avah usually involves a violation of one of the commandments.

The third word comes from the root “pasha” which means to rebel. This one means full-fledged revolt, doing those things we know we shouldn’t be doing and harming ourselves and others along the way.

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, the word chatah, meaning missing the mark is the word that won out and so that sense of not quite getting things right in life, despite our best intentions is what sin in the New Testament becomes primarily about.

I’m not sure that would cover all of Tiger Woods’ sins, but it probably covers some.

What’s been helpful for me when it comes to thinking and talking about sin, is to realize that what tears at the fabric of our relationship with God, ourselves and others actually comes in many shapes and forms.

When Marcus Borg talks about sin he uses a number of different metaphors, all of them biblical in origin. There’s the sin of being blind, not seeing the pain in our brother’s eyes, and furthermore not recognizing our part in causing that pain; there’s the sin of bondage, the hold that our addictions can have on us, or simply the behaviours that no longer serve us; there’s the

sin of exile, living inauthentic lives, wearing masks and never owning up to who we truly are; there's the sin of the closed heart, our inability to forgive ourselves or others for whatever reason that may be; then there's the sin of alienation caused by hunger and thirst... for more that is spiritual and less that is material, for more that brings life to us and others and less that chokes the life out of us; finally there's the sin of being lost, having somehow wandered far away from the goodness we were intended for, the experience of looking at ourselves in the mirror and wondering how we've become a person we never wanted to become.

In all of these scenarios, it's not the behaviours we engage in that are the problem really. It's our response to them. The real sin is found in not acknowledging these behaviours in which we are caught up in and the damage they do because of our failure to take notice.

In the garden, when Eve takes the apple, and Adam follows suit, the problem is not so much that they've done the thing they were told not to, eat the forbidden fruit. The problem is that Eve turns around and blames the serpent for her mistake and Adam turns around and blames God for giving him Eve for his. The result of not taking responsibility for their actions is broken relationships.... and isn't that the case in all the times we miss the mark, rebel, lose our way or however you want to name what we commonly call sin.... the end result is relationships in need of mending.

Whatever you think about Tiger Woods, whether he was sincere in his apology or not, whether he deserves to be forgiven or not, we need to give him credit for acknowledging and taking responsibility for his wrongful behaviour. As painful as it may be to air our dirty laundry, recognizing that something is wrong is the first step toward setting it right again.

And it may be that of all the things that Tiger said in his 13 ½ minute statement to the public, the most important part was when he both acknowledged his need for help to change his ways and sought out that help from his friends and family. The question is whether or not people will actually help him to change his ways, or whether they will be complicit in allowing him not to.

You'll know what I mean by this if you've ever tried to quit smoking, or start dieting or do just about anything to let go of a former life. It's amazing how easily we let each other off when we are trying to live out of something new. How many times have we said to each other...surely one small piece of cake won't matter.

But the truth is that we need each other to overcome our sins, to break our old habits, to find what was once lost, to reclaim who we once were, whether our sins are individual or corporate by nature. And that's what the season of Lent is all about... a time for us to both name for ourselves and support each other in restoring our relationships.... in being made new...in being truly absolved of our sins.

It's also a time for us to experience amazing grace, because it's only when we see and acknowledge what needs finding and healing and reclaiming and forgiving in our lives, that we are opened to the possibility of knowing and experiencing the love that can give us what we need.