

Who Can Stand?
Genesis 3:8-19
Romans 5:6-11; 7:18-25a

“If you should mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand?”

According to Merriam-Webster, there are very few words to mince when defining iniquity. Iniquity, I read in the first place, is gross injustice: wickedness. “[We are a] nation still struggling with the aftereffects of the iniquity of slavery” In the second place, iniquity is a wicked act or thing: sin. “The use of illegal narcotics is not only a destroyer of personal health, but also an *iniquity* that undermines our society.” Then there are the synonyms that remind us of the depths to which the human creature can and does stoop, in alphabetical order: corruption, debauchery, depravity, immorality, iniquitousness, libertinage, libertinism, licentiousness, profligacy, vice, sin. Can you tell that we are in the season of Lent? If you should hold our wickedness against us, Lord, who could stand?

Yet even in the face of this relentless assault of synonyms on our character, we cannot help but ask what exactly counts as a wicked act or thing. What particular sorts of behavior would lead us to conclude that we are, in fact, wicked? To return to last Sunday’s sermon, no doubt all of us have done some things we wish we had not done. We may even be more willing to admit that we have left undone some things we ought to have done. But if we sidestep this verse, if instead we justify ourselves to a god of our own making, we will miss the fact that none of these *things* we might do or fail to do have *anything* to do with the definition of iniquity that causes the psalmist to tremble before the judgment of the One for whom he was made.

“At the root of the question which the psalmist asks,” writes Old Testament Professor Artur Weiser in the first place, “is the shattering perception of the tremendous power of sin and of the paralyzing powerlessness of [mortals] in [their] bondage to it. [In the person of the

psalmist, each of us] is unconditionally delivered up to God, from whom [our human] condition cannot be concealed.” In other words, before the God who walks in the garden in the cool of the day, we are all naked. I draw great comfort from Weiser’s words, from the strange assurance that I am not the only one trying to cover myself. Who can stand? No one, simply no one!

In the second place, if we mean to do business with the psalmist’s iniquity that is our own, says theologian Gordon Kaufman, we need to think of the sort of guilt that clings to us like “the bloody spots on Lady Macbeth’s hands. No rationalization can destroy it, nor can the intervention or consolation of friends. A barrier is set up which cannot be overcome,” or at least cannot be overcome by the one who dwells in the depths of estrangement from God. It is as though we have been expelled from the garden, exiled east of Eden. This, says the Bible, over and over again, story after story, this *is* the human condition. This is the death in life that has exercised its dominion over us from our first disobedience. This is the heart of darkness from which only the one whom we have wronged can deliver us. Who can stand? No one, simply no one.

Then were I, in the third place, to choose the synonym that comes closest, on Merriam-Webster’s list, to the iniquity that is the human condition, Calvinist that I am, I would have to choose depravity, meaning our warping or distorting of the basically human in us. “The Calvinist doctrine of total depravity,” writes novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson, “was directed against [what are called] casuistical enumerations of sins, against the attempt to assign [sins] different degrees of seriousness [based on general principles of ethics]. [This is why our desire to know exactly what counts as wicked is beside the point!] For Calvinists, we are all absolutely, that is equally, unworthy of, and dependent upon, the free intervention of grace.”

Put another way, we are all *equally prone* to warp the image of God in us, distort the relationship for which we were made, beyond recognition. Moreover, “the doctrine declares that this depravity is total, meaning that it affects every department of our nature: intellect, emotions, will...rendering us totally incapable of achieving salvation or peace without God’s grace.” [Ben Lacey Rose] A manifestation of our total depravity, say the old theologians, is the “bondage of human will” such that the self-centered self cannot become other-directed by trying hard. “An ungrateful person cannot become grateful; a proud person cannot become humble; an unloving person cannot become loving by trying hard....” In contrast to Charles Duhigg’s assertion in the *New York Times* Book Review section today, that once you understand habits, “you have the freedom—and the responsibility—to remake them,” iniquity is not a bad habit that yields to human effort. The human will,” says John Leith, “is not free to choose what it is not.” What can stand? No one, simply no one.

Do you begin to see how iniquity is not a matter of a wicked act or thing; it is the state that finds us unable to keep ourselves from choosing to live at enmity with one another and with God and with the human being we originally were created to be. We are unable to will ourselves out of the depths, unable to find our way back to the garden, unable to cover our nakedness. Paul put it perfectly in the seventh of Romans: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Or to voice the implicit fear of the psalmist, will God, instead of coming to our rescue, mark our iniquities? Will God hold the days and seasons spent without reference to God against us? Will God see us only through our opposition to God’s purposes or our rebellion against God’s will? Will God mark our unrighteousness—our utterly

screwed up relationship to God and to one another—and cast us away from God’s presence forever?

But listen again to the psalmist’s words from out of the depths: If you should mark iniquity, Lord, who can stand? He speaks in the subjunctive mood, the mood of uncertainty, says Michele Morano. It is the mood that “helps you tell...what might be...the mood of mystery...of faith interwoven with doubt. It’s a held breath, a hand reaching out....It’s humility, deference, the opposite of hubris.” When it is from out of the depths of your own iniquity, your own estrangement, your own sin that you cry out to God, there is an astonishment that you and God are speaking at all, an uncertainty, a faith interwoven with doubt that the God to whom you speak will do something other than destroy you. “Release from the depths of despair and the abyss of sin and guilt comes not from the self-help of the one caught in that condition,” says Old Testament professor and friend Patrick Miller. It rests in the judgment of the God who has every right to mark iniquity, except (hear the astonishment) *if God should not*. There is in the cry, says Miller, “a need that has both an objective and a subjective character, external and internal dimensions. The external need lies in [our fate], the fate of the guilty before the righteous judge....The internal, subjective need is just as great. It is the sense of the depths, despair, isolation and estrangement that can be overcome only by the initiative of God, not to make or keep iniquities but to wipe them away, blot them out....”

Wretched man that I am! Paul exclaims. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. In him, God has taken the initiative, has come to us like a parent to a prodigal, He has borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows as his own, in his flesh that was wounded for our transgressions, in his body that was bruised for our iniquities. He did this not because we were innocent, but while we were yet sinners; he did this

not for the eternal salvation of the ethically pure, but in order to dwell with those of us who finally know we need him every hour; he did this not for those who have managed to justify themselves, but for us who cry out, especially in the night watches, when we are sure we have fallen too far from his grace; he did this because the God who is our Judge is also our Savior who is for us and who decided, from the foundation of the world, to be with us eternally. As Karl Barth put it, “[Christ] steps into Adam’s place and into our place with the claim, the right and the power to make our sin and our death his responsibility, and so to pronounce God’s pardon....” Whether you can comprehend this or not, if you want to see what you look like in the mirror of God’s grace, look first to Jesus Christ and only after you have seen yourself in him, look to Adam in whose place Christ alone stands.

Now and again, I wonder what it would be like to live, day by day, without the words of Scripture sounding in my head, explaining me to myself; to live without Paul reminding me that I can will what is right, but I cannot do it, wretch that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. For as long as I can remember, these words have had everything to do with how I critique my own actions and manage, nevertheless, to get up out of bed every morning. What if I really am a forgiven sinner, I say to myself looking back at myself in astonishment as I brush my teeth? But the Bible tells me so. And while I have always struggled to believe the forgiven part, always spoken of this amazing grace in the subjunctive mood, I would not be surprised if most of the culture presently struggles to believe the sinner part. That is why I wonder what it would be like to live with the moral compass imparted to me as a cog in a consumer-driven culture, for instance, or as a child raised in a family that has never bowed their heads together or as a privileged citizen who happened to be born into a meritocracy or as a student of the Enlightenment, say, or postmodernism or the latest

intellectual paradigm shift. In a sense, I was born into all of these world views, except that the story which begins in one garden and comes to completion in another garden is the story that alone allows me to stand, my iniquity erased in him who has borne my sorry self all the way to the grave.

“From heaven it falls, writes the poet (Stuart Kestenbaum) of “A Cold Rain the Day Before Spring,

just the opposite
of prayer, which I send up
at the traffic light: please

let me begin over again, one
more time over again, wipe the slate
clean, the same way after school
janitors, keys jangling from
belt loops, will use a wet rag and wipe

the school day off, so there is only
the residue, faint white on the smooth
surface. It's the same way
the infield looks before the game
begins, or the ice on a rink

between periods. All new again
for the moment and glistening.
Imagine each day you get to start
again and again. Again. How many
days does the janitor enter the room

of your soul, wipe it clean
go out into the hallway
and push his broom
down the long corridor, full
of doors to so many rooms.

If you should mark iniquity, Lord, who could stand? Wretch that I am, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.