

SIN, FORGIVENESS, & THE SACRAMENT OF PENANCE PART 2: SIN (cont.)

“Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned - for up to the time of the law, sin was in the world, though sin is not accounted when there is no law. But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who is to come” (Romans 5:12-14).

Our understanding of sin includes several different but related concepts: sin as a power, sin as a choice, and sin as a state of being. The well-known story of the fall of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3) relates in figurative language the presence of all three understandings of sin as part of the human condition from the very beginning. The character who sets the fall in motion is the serpent. He represents sin as a power, a force in the world that works against God by seeking to convince human beings to focus on themselves and to reject God, whom we are created to serve. We encounter the power of sin through our experience of temptation, in which sin preys on our normally healthy appetites and desires by deceiving and corrupting our minds.

Even in the confusion created by the power of sin, however, we retain God’s greatest gift - free will. God gives us free will for the purpose of freely choosing to fulfill our destiny by loving and serving him, but, for our will to be free, we must also be free to reject God. Here we see sin as a choice, a decision made and put into action by human beings through which we reject God and his will for us. This is symbolized in the Adam and Eve story by the choice to violate God’s one commandment at that time and eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

Like all choices, sin has consequences, and “the consequence of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Death is not an arbitrary punishment levied by God on sinners; it is simply the logical outcome of choosing to sin. God is the source of all life. When we sin, we reject God, and, therefore, we reject his gift of life. God, who gives us our freedom, respects our freedom. He will not force himself on us, and so, if we reject him, he will respect our decision. This is symbolized in the Adam and Eve story by their expulsion from the garden. They choose to reject God and his plan for them, so he sends them out to make their own way in the world amid suffering and strife until, separated from their source and goal, they die.

Because human beings chose to sin, and, through their sin, death entered the world, all human beings are subject to sin and death in the state we call original sin. We are not born choosing to sin, but the power of sin at work in the world overshadows us. Only the light of God’s saving grace, experienced first in baptism, can drive that darkness away. Enlightened by grace, we are free to make our own choice: to choose to love and serve God, or to reject him. However, the power of sin still lurks in our world, whispering its lies into our ears, and, if we choose to listen to that voice instead of God’s, if we choose to sin, then we fall right back into the chains from which baptism had freed us. We fall into a state of sin. And if our sin is serious enough, and we die in that state, then God will respect our choice, and we will be separated from him for ever in the state we call Hell.

Sin is real, as are its consequences. But God's grace is also real and always more powerful than sin. And best of all, it is free for the asking for all who fall back into sin after baptism in the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, which will be the subject of next week's column.