

## ***“The Light Is On For You”***

### **Sin and Conversion**

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A stain. A black mark. That’s the image that was offered to me in conveying the reality of sin, a black mark on my soul. The baptismal liturgy seems to confirm this image. As the white garment is handed to the newly baptized with the words: *“Receive this baptismal garment and bring it unstained to the judgment seat of our Lord...”* Does this image speak to you today? In the light of the horrors of recent history: war, the Holocaust, genocides, environmental disasters, terrorism and the growing violence in our country, does the static image of a stain begin to convey the seriousness and our participation in sin?

Our Jewish sisters and brothers use the Hebrew verb *“hata”* for the concept of sin. This word literally means *“to miss the mark.”* It’s like shooting at a target but not hitting the bull’s eye. It also encompasses the idea of failing to reach a goal or to do what is expected. This image reflects an enlivened spiritual life struggling with self and God as see in the story of Jacob wrestling night with *“the angel of the Lord.”* [See Genesis 32:23-33] Do we not daily strive to live the life of the Kingdom of God as taught us by Jesus? I expect your answer is “yes.” But we don’t always make the goal, hit the bull’s eye or do what is expected as followers of Jesus, do we.

Jesus offers an intriguing image of sin, *“...they do not know what they are doing.”* [Luke 23:34] Ignorance as an excuse! The view is partial or blocked, the life-experience is narrow, the knowledge base is inadequate, or the attitude is too self-assured; all forms of ignorance that affect our decision making and responses to life. This image does not give us an excuse but challenges us to not be hasty in judgment of others and situations. *“Things are seldom what they seem...”* Buttercup sings in Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta, H.M.S. Pinafore. Humanity mistook an itinerant manual laborer-preacher-rabbi and was blind to the presence of divinity. Jesus’ image relates well to the parables he taught. We are a lost coin or a strayed lost sheep that needs to be found; a son who, in his immaturity, makes a series of inappropriate life decisions that affect his father and brother or a child who says “no” to a parent’s request and rethinks their decision and changes their mind and thus their actions. [See Luke 15:1-32 and Matthew 21:28-32] We often simply don’t know what we are doing.

The Hebraic images of Jesus and Jewish community are active. They recognize our participation in sin but also give admittance to hope allowing us to try again, to return, to be found. They are images filled with hope and compassion. Sin is not a dead end. We get to try again and again with the grace of God to live the life expected of us by God and I expect the life we would prefer to lead our self. Is there no more wonderful feeling then to return and be welcomed and embraced? As Robert Frost reminds us in his poem, The Death of the Hired Man,

*“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, They have to take you in.”*

To be found, to be sought after, whether as a child lost in the next aisle of a supermarket, a lone traveler in the surroundings of a foreign country and language or a student floundering in dense subject matter; to be found by a parent, a person who speaks, even broken English, or a mentoring teacher who patiently guides you through the material, is a feeling of great relief and salvation.

Do not these images, rather than a black stain or mark, have a vitality that can lead to a true conversion of heart? And what is conversion? The word ‘conversion’ from the Latin, “*convertere*” means “to turn around.” Its Greek equivalent, “*metanoia*” means a “transformative change of heart.” We are given a wonderful example of conversion in the parable of the son who, when asked to go and work in the vineyard, said “no” to his father but afterwards *changed his mind!* [Matthew 21:28-32] Jesus follows up the parable by announcing that tax collectors (traitors) and prostitutes *are* entering the Kingdom of God. Why? Because they changed their minds, said “yes” to God, and chose to live differently. We might wonder how many times did they “miss the bull’s eye” before they said a full-hearted “yes”. No matter. They eventually did say “yes” to God!

## **Reflections**

- What image/s were you given to understand the concept of “sin”? Do you find them of value in your spiritual life?