

In our collect this morning we pray to God, who “alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners.” That phrase may seem a little flowery and overwritten to us today. But the idea in it has a long and distinguished theological history—it goes right to the heart of the basic Christian doctrine of sin and redemption. What does it mean to us to say that we have “unruly wills and affections”? What does it mean to us to say that God alone can bring those unruly wills and affections “into order”?

Perhaps we need to say first that the doctrine of sin isn't very popular today. I remember in the early 1970s seeing a book on my father's bookshelf called *Whatever Became of Sin?*—even then, talking about sin was beginning to feel old-fashioned and out of step and kind of negative. And I think a lot of us *have* had it up to here with rigid moralists and fire-and-brimstone preachers who are all too ready to condemn what someone else has done as sinful, but whose own sinfulness and hypocrisy always seems to come out in the end. And then of course there's the contemporary atheists' claim that Christians spend too much time obsessing over sin, and that makes us joyless, unhappy, negative, downer people—and who wants to be like that? After all, don't we believe in a God of creativity and love and abundant life and joy? Why then would we want to talk about sin, when sin seems pretty much the opposite of *good news*?

But I think the doctrine of sin, when it's properly understood and put in its proper context, *is* in fact good news. It's good news because it names a truth about us, and, as Jesus says in the Gospel of John, the truth will make us free.

The truth the doctrine of sin names about us is that we human beings are created for love. The reason God makes us, the reason we exist, is for love. We are created to love God, to love each other, to love beauty, to love wisdom, to love justice, to love well-being, to love food, to love drink, to love sex, to love companionship, to love affection, to love joy, to love life. The most fundamental truth about us is that we are made for love. But the fact is that our loves get mixed up, our loves get out of order: We love one thing too much, to the exclusion of something else we ought to love. We love something out of proportion, taking more and more of it until our love turns into greed. We love the idea or notion of a thing more than we love the reality itself. We love the feeling of our own satisfaction more than we love the good that we could share. We love success or ambition or money or power or possessions or prestige—all of them abstract qualities of social constructs—more than we love the concrete act of giving and receiving with generosity and grace. We love our own instant gratification more than we love God. The truth about us is that we are made for love, but in fact our loves so often get mixed up, misdirected, badly out of whack. That's the truth St Augustine named when he summed up the doctrine of sin by saying that sin is “disordered love.” That's what our collect means by saying that our wills and affections—fundamentally good in themselves—have become unruly, without rule, misguided, distorted, disordered.

And we see a chilling portrayal of what disordered love can do in our Gospel reading today, in the character of Judas. Mary anoints Jesus with expensive perfumed oil, and Judas complains that the oil should have been sold and the money put in the common purse so that it could be given to the poor. And Judas has a point. Selling possessions and giving to the poor is something Jesus frequently taught about and called people to do. For Judas to say that now *sounds* like he is speaking out of compassion for the poor, it sounds like he is speaking out of respect for the teachings of Jesus—it sounds like he is saying the loving thing. But John in his narrative gives us Judas's real reason for saying this: he wants the money in the purse because that way he can steal it, he can take it for himself and spend it on his own

gratification. Judas loves. But Judas loves his own gratification, his cleverness in stealing without anyone knowing, his power, more than he loves the poor, more than he loves Mary, more than he loves Jesus. Judas's priorities are badly out of whack, Judas's loves are badly disordered—and the result of his disordered love is the arrest and torture and execution of Jesus, as we will hear next week in the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday. That is what disordered love—that is what sin—can do.

And that is why we pray to God, who alone can bring our disordered, unruly loves into order. The promise of redemption, in its most fundamental sense, is the promise that God loves us, and God makes that love manifest in Jesus, and God gives us a community of love in the Church of Jesus, so that through the challenging and wonderful process of loving each, loving each other as Jesus loves us, our unruly and disordered loves can be taught and trained and shaped and formed and brought into order, with the priority and the proportion that God wants for us. According to the basic Christian doctrine of sin, the promise of redemption is the promise of love re-ordered by the grace of God.

And we see a marvelous example of that Christ-ordered love in our Gospel in the character of Mary. Mary has this expensive perfumed oil; we don't why she has it, what she bought it for, what she intended it for when she kept it; but she has it. And it means a lot to her. And when Jesus stops in Bethany, six days before the Passover, on his way to Jerusalem, where Mary knows he will be arrested and tortured and executed—when Jesus stops in Bethany, Mary takes out her precious oil and uses it to anoint him for his burial. It is an extravagant gesture, an unexpected gesture, a gesture that's a little embarrassing, perhaps, to the others sitting there—a gesture of deep and intimate and genuine love. It's a gesture that shows how much Mary has centered her loves on Jesus. And it's not the first time. When Jesus came to dine with them once before, while Martha was distracted with much serving, Mary kept her attention focused on Jesus. When their brother Lazarus was dead in the tomb, and all their world had collapsed in grief, Mary knew that his life could be restored in Jesus. Everything that matters to Mary, everything that makes life make sense for Mary, is centered in Jesus, in the love of God Jesus has shown her and helped her show to others. So now she shows that same love for Jesus, doing for him the one thing she can do as he goes to Jerusalem to die: she brings out her expensive perfumed oil and anoints him for his burial. That is how much her love is re-ordered in Jesus.

And that is essentially what we pray for, too, in our collect today. We pray that God's love for us, made manifest in Jesus, will take up our unruly, disordered loves and sort them out. We pray that in the love of Jesus we will find all the many things we care about—our expensive perfumed oil, our possessions, our relationships, our hopes, our fears, our aspirations, our families, our friends, our work, our time, our desire, our satisfaction—we pray that in the love of Jesus we will find all the many things we care about centered and grounded and given their priority, re-ordered to true meaning, in the love of God in Christ.

And certainly part of that re-ordering, part of the way God loves our unruly wills and affections into order, is here in this Eucharist. In our service today we get to be like Mary: just as Mary brought her expensive perfumed oil to Jesus, so we bring forward to this altar our bread, our wine, our money, our very selves—outward and visible signs of the things we hold dear, the things we care about, the things that matter most to us. And we present them to Jesus in our Great Thanksgiving, and we ask Jesus to take them and bless them and break them and return them to us, grounded now and centered and finding all their meaning in embodying the love of God in Christ. In our Eucharist today we bring to this altar all our loves, so that all our loves may be ordered and oriented to the true love of God.

And so today we pray to God, who alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners. May our wills and affections be so knit together in God's love, that our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found. Amen.