


SINNER, WRETCH, AND REPROBATE

1.

 To see myself as a sinner is simple enough, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a sinner as “a transgressor against the divine law.” If I care to pay attention, which I usually do not, I can find all too many ways in which I transgress regularly against the great commandment, to love God with all my heart and soul, and my neighbor as myself. On a daily basis, I fail to keep the balance that this commandment requires of me: that I love and care for myself, but not so well that I become incapable of loving and serving others; and that I remember to praise God as the author of life itself, but not so blindly that I lose sight of the down-to-earth dimensions of my everyday relationships and commitments.

I also find myself laughing in church, laughing at myself, when I hear Paul’s epistles read aloud. He begs the Ephesians, for example, to bear with one another “with all humility and gentleness, with patience,” and with love (Eph. 4:2). My martial soul perks up at this, my impatient, ungentle, unhumble self. Is *this* all it takes, to live with others in peace? The efficient little mocker within scoffs at the very idea—calls it rank idealism—even as my conscience admits that, yes, I could do better.

Paul's assertion in Romans, that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) seems easy enough to believe, when I look around, when I read the news. Other people most certainly fall short. But myself? It is tempting to take the pharisaical route, and judge myself to be morally sound, not like "them," whoever they may be. Conversely, I might believe myself to be such a dreadful sinner as to be beyond remedy. Redemption is for "them," lucky fools, and all that is left for me is to wallow in despair. To admit to being no more, no less than an ordinary sinner is not comforting, it does not shine with the glamour of despondency; above all, it does nothing to foster my self-esteem. It is easiest simply to reject the whole concept as negative and old-fashioned.

I am a sinner, and the Presbyterian church offers me a weekly chance to come clean, and to pray, along with others, what is termed a prayer of confession. But pastors can be so reluctant to use the word "sin" that in church we end up confessing nothing except our highly developed capacity for denial. One week, for example, the confession began, "Our communication with Jesus tends to be too infrequent to experience the transformation in our lives You want us to have," which seems less a prayer than a memo from one professional to another. At such times I picture God as a wily writing teacher who leans across a table and says, not at all gently, "Could you possibly be troubled to say what you mean?" It would be refreshing to answer, simply, "I have sinned."

2.

The word "wretch" has taken two paths to arrive at current English usage. The *OED* tells me that in Old English it had a somewhat romantic connotation: a wretch was a wanderer, an adventurer, a knight errant. In Old Teutonic, however, a wretch meant an exile, a

banished person, and it is there that the word's negative connotations begin to haunt us. The word as used today means not so much one who has been driven out of a native land, but one who would be miserable anywhere. To some extent we have internalized the word to mean someone who is exiled from being at peace within the self. A "wretch" may designate someone who is materially poor and unfortunate, but it also means a person who is inwardly hapless and pathetic.

The word "wretch," then, does not paint a picture of who we want to be. Or who we think we are. The word has become so unpopular in recent years, in fact, that people began complaining about its appearance in the first verse of "Amazing Grace"—"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me." Some hymnals have taken out the offending word, but the bowdlerization of the text that results is thoroughly wretched English, and also laughably bland, which, taken together, is not an inconsiderable accomplishment: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved someone like me." *Someone?* Anyone? Anyone home?

Is there a fabled "someone" who only thinks of good things in the middle of the night, who never lies awake regretting the selfish, night-unforgivable things that he or she has done? Maybe the unconscious of some people really does tell them that they're okay, all the time. Maybe there are people who are so thoroughly at home in themselves that they can't imagine being other than comfortable, let alone displaced or wretched in spirit. But I wonder. I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness—exile, wandering, loss, misery, whether inwardly or in outward circumstance—has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human.

People want grace, it seems, and will admit to being "lost" and "blind" in John Newton's fine old hymn. But don't ask them to admit that it might take knowing oneself as a wretch to truly know grace for the wonder that it is. Don't expect them to offer mercy to

the wretched of the world, following Christ's commandment to feed the hungry, tend the sick, clothe the naked, and visit those in prison—*Let them help themselves. I did. I became Someone.* Don't expect them to be good Buddhists, either. It seems to me that if you can't ever admit to being a wretch, you haven't been paying attention.

3.

"Reprobate" may be the loneliest word in the world: "rejected by God and destined for damnation." Other definitions include "condemned," and "lost or hardened in sin." Sometimes it seems that people glory in being reprobate, which in its Latin root means "not approved." Linda Yablonsky, a former heroin addict, wrote a brief essay recently in which she stated that most of the addicts she knew "wanted a wasted appearance. They were quite vain about it. To them it was the epitome of a style they could call their own. They were thin, and thin was chic."

She went on to say that "most addicts develop habits while in search of community. They don't want to share their drugs, but they don't want to take them alone." This strikes me as a grace note in a grim situation, making me wonder if the desire for community isn't in itself a grace. The drug controls one's desires, and all but obliterates the desire to share. The need for community makes sharing necessary, and will not be ignored. If it triggers the sort of turning that is at the heart of conversion, it may give God something more to work with in a situation that to human sight can seem utterly hopeless.

I suspect that the Christian religion has always harbored those who relish the thought that some people are hopeless reprobates, destined for damnation. It has also had proponents of the view that God's love is so great, and God's power so unfathomably vast, that

ultimately God will find a way to redeem us all. Eminent theologians (Origen, Augustine, Calvin, and Barth among them) have carefully interpreted the Bible to come down on both sides of the question; the argument has raged since the fourth century. To me, the most intriguing thing about John Calvin's doctrine of predestination (inherited from Augustine) is not his belief that some are gratuitously predestined by God to eternal salvation and some to damnation but that no one but God knows who is who. There, among the heroin addicts, is one destined for eternal joy. There, among the faithful widows of an ordinary church, is one destined for damnation. It strikes me that only a French lawyer could have come up with so complex, if not bizarre, a justification for treating all people as if they could be among the elect, the chosen of God. If the history of Christianity has taught me nothing else, it reminds me that it takes all kinds.

Evil acts daily oppress this world we call home, but we do not know enough to say that another is irredeemable, condemned, destined for damnation. That judgment is reserved for God. But can we limit God's judgment, or God's grace, to our own understanding? Even when no amount of calumny seems sufficient, in the case of the terrorist bomber, the man who kidnaps, rapes, and murders a child, or the architect of genocide for political gain, the answer we long for does not come. We simply do not know how God will choose to work against, with, or through such a person. We may work to see those who do evil brought to justice in this world and may pray for anyone here and now who seems "hardened in sin." But when it comes to the word "reprobate," I wonder if it is a word that any human being has the right to call another.