

“The Sins of My Youth”

June 10, 2018

Celebrate Life speaker: Pastor Doug Warren
(Pride week bonus sermon)

Forgive the sins and errors of my youth. In your constant love and goodness, remember me, LORD! Psalm 25:7 GNT

I have breakfast every Saturday with a neighbour. Not long ago when we were talking about the basal cell spot on my forehead that is awaiting surgery, I described it as being a reminder of the sins of my youth. You see, back when I was young - 60 or so years ago - I really wanted to be brown. I really liked the bronzed look. What could be sexier than dark brown skin, blue eyes and blond hair? (Gives me shivers just thinking about it!) And of course like all teenagers I wanted to be as attractive as I possibly could be ... but the reality was that I was a skinny 6 foot 2, gangly and awkward, uncoordinated teen with crooked teeth, without the ability to walk across the room without kicking at least one piece of furniture.

So, to achieve my goal of being different than God had made me, that meant hours of lying out in the sun. And, having been designed to be white - fair skinned - I needed all the help I could get. I remember putting Johnson's Baby oil, with a tincture of iodine in it, all over my body, and then I sizzled and sautéed in the sun. Occasionally I got it right. And I did brown up a bit. Most of the times I just got very red, and then had flaky, peeling skin to deal with. Yup. *Really* sexy!!! I can remember saying to a friend I'd rather be brown than rich, even if in latter years it meant being wrinkled and brown. So, now, neither brown nor rich has come to pass ... although wrinkles have.

At 78, I wish I hadn't been obsessed with being sexy. Brown. Although "rich" would have been nice. I've already had one basal cell surgically removed, another one ready to be gouged out, and several new suspicious spots appearing.The sins of my youth....Ahh

Now, I am sure there were some who thought tonight might be a "tell all" revelation of some titillating tales. Sorry. If I ever publish my memoir, which I have been writing on and off for a couple of years, there will be enough of those stories. But not tonight. I may even wait for the book's release to be published posthumously, so then I won't have to blush when I meet you.

But, before we talk about the sins of my youth maybe we should talk about what it means to “sin”. Some churches have been really big on “sin”, spending lots of airtime discussing “sins of commission”, or “sins of omission”. Not to get too heavy on this, we do need to know what we’re talking about tonight.

"Sin" ... in our Bible, translated from both Greek and Hebrew ... is the act or state of missing the mark; the original sense of New Testament Greek ἁμαρτία (hamartia) "sin", is failure, being in error, missing the mark,"

In a moment I am going to hand out some paper and pencils and we, each one of us, will list at least ten things we have done (when we knew what we were doing) and in so doing we deliberately missed the mark, ... even though we might have enjoyed doing so; We'll call those sins of “commission”.

...Then ... on the other side of the paper I would like us to write ten things that we *didn't do* that missed the mark, fell short of the target of a full and abundant life, OR the things we didn't know were sin because we had been taught to think incorrectly about what sin is and what it isn't. We'll call those sins of omission. It will be an interesting exercise as we share what we have written in our small groups. ... Just kidding... But I will share a little.

As a kid I was taught by my church that dancing, going to the movies, playing cards, smoking, drinking, and “making out” before marriage were sins. I may have to confess that, to date, I have only been successful in abstaining from one from that entire list. I still don't know how to play cards. My church never preached about trying to get brown though, so that would have had to be a “sin of omission “. I didn't know the end results.

Ahh, ... but wanting to be brown wasn't my biggest sin. Wanting to change that part of how I'd been created wasn't “it”. So, let me tell you what I think it was:

I struggled as a kid with trying to fit into the expectations of a family, a church, a society. I didn't fit the norm. I wasn't your macho male who wanted to play sports, talk smutty about girls, and strut. In fact, I was beginning to realize that I wasn't really attracted to girls at all, although, interestingly, most of my good friends were female. I found myself drawn both emotionally and physically to some of the guys in my classes. I didn't know what to call this attraction. In fact, back in those days I can't remember every hearing the words “gay” or “homosexual”. Unlike today in most fundamentalist evangelical churches, it was never even preached

about. I honestly felt I was the only person in the entire world that felt this way. I also believed I had no one I could talk to about my feelings.

More and more, though, I began to wonder if these feelings could be wrong; that they might be sinful. I wasn't "normal", was I? There was no one who could help me interpret these feelings. And then I got to a Christian College and it was talked about, quite a bit, and I remember doing a research paper for a Sociology class on "Homosexuality". I delved into that subject much more deeply than I would have spent time on the eating habits of New Guinea fishermen in the 16th century. I dug really deep, and the views of both Christian and secular scholars in the 60's didn't make me feel very good. It was then that I started to realize that *my* religious culture defined who I was beginning to understand myself to be me, as sinful. I started to hear "abnormal", "deviant" and worse. Surely the jaws of hell were opening in anticipation of my arrival. I hadn't *done* anything about my feelings, but in that context I began to think my very *being* was sinful.

Then, out of the blue, I had my first real teenage romance. It was a real heart-quickenning, shortening of breath affair. It was nothing like what I had experienced on my dates with various girlfriends. I met a guy. And I experienced a reciprocal attraction and spent every spare minute I could with him. Yet, from what I had read, and was beginning to hear, this was wrong, and I believed it "missed the mark", fell way short of the target of an abundant life. That would have been a "sin of commission". Now, 59 years later I can still remember thinking at 19, "how can anything so beautiful be wrong?" I was, as they say, in the thralls of a major man crush.

But in spite of this, guilt started to creep in assisted by the homophobic atmosphere I was experiencing at the College, and I was torn between my infatuated love of this handsome and sensitive man, also a Christian, and the infusion of guilt and worry that God would now reject me. And so I broke up with him. He couldn't understand it. And I know he was terribly hurt by the breakup. I was hurting too. But my deep desire to not offend the God I wanted to serve, not to offend Jesus whom I wanted to follow and to whom I had given my life, made me think I had to make this hard decision.

From that period on in my life I felt the need to protect myself, and I found safety in a closet of self-denial, all the while wanting, seeking to be changed. I couldn't understand why God wasn't hearing my cries for help. If I was such a sinner for just being gay, and God disapproved of my life so strongly, why wasn't God doing something to help me be the person that I thought I should be in order to please God?. No. My prayers seemingly fell on deaf ears. For years. Actually, even though I had moved away from all

my familiar connections here in the east, living in the foothills outside Calgary, where I came “out” with a bit of a flare, I still had this monkey on my back.

But the answer to my prayers *did* arrive, but didn’t arrive until I had a real spiritual experience at a church where I was playing piano for the services.

I had continued to attend church, having found a church where most members of the congregation were either gay or lesbian. (Metropolitan Community Church) At one evening service when a singing group from LA was leading worship we were singing a Gaither tune. I was playing for the congregation to sing: “*I am loved, I am loved ... for the One who knows me best loves me most...*” Wow! “**FOR THE ONE WHO KNOWS ME BEST LOVES ME MOST.**”

Even though the heavy burden of guilt had lessened and I was more or less living my life freely, I had not reached a point where I really, *really* believed that God loved me. When I heard and sang “*for the One who knows me best loves me most*” something happened. I couldn’t see the keyboard. Tears streamed down my face and dropped on the piano keys. I was a spongy mess. It had hit me to the core: I was actually loved by God. Not tolerated. Not just accepted on the fringes of a secondary level. God who knew me better than anyone else in the whole wide world, also loved me more than anyone else loved me.

In my ignorance of God’s true nature, reinforced by some slanted teaching, based on just a few misunderstood verses of Scripture, I had struggled most of my life up to that point. I’d been a pretty good kid, I thought, and yet it wasn’t what I had done or hadn’t done, that left me feeling that God didn’t love me - really. I had been told that I was “less than” and I had accepted that, I had believed it.

I know that you know that we’re all sinners. We all miss the mark from time to time, sometimes willingly, sometimes not knowing that we are falling short. Intentionally. Unintentionally. If I had completed my list - both sides of the paper - I would have had no trouble telling you about all the stuff for which I feel sorry. But for some reason, not knowing, or refusing to believe that God loves us as we are, unconditionally, really seems like a sin too. If it is, then it *is* the biggest sin of my youth. God made us the way we are, so why wouldn’t God love us, the very creation of God’s own hands? You’ve heard the expression that “God don’t make no junk?” And God doesn’t. Jesus came to show us that truth. And so, ...

Before I sit down, would you say aloud with me:

The One who knows me best, loves me most."

Say it again.

The One who knows me best, loves me most."

Again.

The One who knows me best, loves me most."

Amen.