

*Verdict: Guilty (but Pardoned)*  
*Romans 3:21-28; I John 1:5-10*  
*August 26, 2012*  
*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church*  
*Milford, Connecticut*  
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I was the nightmare that every parent dreams about with a teen driver in the house. In my first nine months of driving, I was involved in three traffic accidents. The first two were minor but the last was major. The major accident required me to go to court, because in Maryland state law at that time there was not any no-fault insurance. Since there was no police officer or witness at the accident, we had to go to court to determine who was at fault and whose insurance company would pay.

Now, there may not have been a police officer at the scene but my father was a law enforcement professional who, as some of you recall from a previous revelation, expected the truth always. In any event, the circumstances of the accident made guilt pretty clear. So when our case was called and the judge asked me my plea, I replied “Guilty.” Because I was.

After gathering the facts from the plaintiff and me, the judge rendered his verdict: guilty—but pardoned. He didn’t say it quite that way. He said, “*I find you guilty and the penalty will be for you to pay the costs of the court*” which in 1972 were \$5.

Lest anyone think that there were no consequences for me, you should know that later my father got a letter from our insurance company. They said I could continue on his policy and his rates would go up 50%. Or I could send proof that I had turned in my driver’s license. You can guess which happened.

But the point is that in that court of law the circumstances were changed. I was guilty: but pardoned! The judge’s verdict was not an invitation to negotiation or to discuss the finer points of jurisprudence. Oh, no! It was a declaration of an altered circumstance in which I now found myself.

This is true, spiritually speaking, of all of us. We are the recipients of God's verdict: guilty, but pardoned! "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" Paul reminded us in today's reading from Romans. Yet we are saved through grace by faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet we sometimes cannot believe this altered state of affairs. We cannot believe that sin has lost and love is victorious. Consider the case of Lt. Hiroo Onoda of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. In 1944, at age 23, he was commissioned to fight using guerilla tactics on the island of Lubang in the Philippines. He was told to neither surrender nor kill himself. His full story, quite interesting, can be found in a "Google" search. So he fought on for 29 years after the end of the war. Only when his former commander, Major Taniguchi, came to him and told him the war was over would he believe. Hear what Lt. Onoda then wrote and consider, as I read it, if we are still carrying the burden of sin. Speaking of himself and his former comrade, Lt. Onoda wrote:

*I eased off the pack that I always carried with me and laid the gun on top of it. Would I really have no more use for this rifle that I had polished and cared for like a baby all these years? Or Kozuka's rifle, which I had hidden in a crevice in the rocks? Had the war really ended thirty years ago? If it had, what had Shimada and Kozuka died for? If what was happening was true, wouldn't it have been better if I had died with them? (No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War, 1974)*

So what is sin, this pack that we carry, this rock that weighs us down? Biblically, it is two things. First, it is alienation from God and neighbor. That is why Jesus answered his questioner about the greatest commandments being love of God and neighbor. Sin is alienation in these two significant relationships. Second, it is missing the mark of our high calling in Christ. "Missing the mark" is an archer's term for missing the target's bull's eye.

In some sense we have most the use of the word “sin.” We don’t hear it that often in worship and even less so in our cultural vocabulary. We sometimes speak of it in ways that are less clear, to ease our conscience or under some effort to avoid being unkind. Yet, as I John says, *“If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”*

Our reluctance to admit our sin can be expressed in many ways, but I’d like to focus on two. The first is self-righteousness. Like the religious leaders with whom Jesus had in conflict, we measure ourselves rather than letting God do the measuring. And if we measure ourselves by looking around for someone who isn’t quite as good....well, then we look better, don’t we?

The problem is that we lose our bearing when we take them off others instead of from God in Christ, the light of the world. In a little while Chris and Emily will sing “Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me.” Listen to power of the words:

*Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life’s tempestuous sea,  
Unknown waves before me roll, hiding rock and treacherous shoal,  
Chart and compass come from Thee: Jesus, Savior, pilot me.*

It’s easy to run aground when we lose sight of God as the ruler and guide of our lives. You may have heard of the naval captain who saw a light on the horizon at night. He said to his first mate: *“Semaphore that ship and tell him to move 15 degrees starboard.”* The semaphore was sent and back came the light, flashing, *“**You** move 15 degrees starboard.”* The captain really got irritated at this and told his first mate to send the message again, *“You move 15 degrees starboard, and sign it ‘Captain Jones of the United States Navy.’”* So the message was sent and the semaphore on the horizon flashed again *“**You** move 15 degrees starboard, signed ‘Seaman Smith of the United States Coast Guard.’”* Well now the captain is absolutely furious, some little upstart coast guard cutter in his way. He said to the first mate: *“I’m going to have that man court-martialed. You semaphore him*

*again 'Move 15 degrees starboard immediately, signed Captain Jones of the United States Navy and the Battleship New Jersey.' After a pause the light on the horizon flashed one last time: "**You** move 15 degrees starboard, signed Seaman Smith of the United States Coast Guard and the Montauk Lighthouse."*

So, one response to sin is being self-righteous. We lose our bearings and even risk running aground when we measure our light against others instead of against God.

A second response to sin is guilt. We feel guilty. We try to make up for those sins which alienate or separate us. Do not misunderstand. I am not speaking here of atonement or restitution, acts which are important in our courts and in our lives to restore relationships. I am speaking rather of a guilt that becomes a way of serving ourselves. We say, to God or others, "*I tried so hard. I'm really trying to change. I'm really trying to do what I'm supposed to do.*" Maybe.

Here's the problem. (Stand with glasses in hand, away from body, and hold them there.) Do you see what I'm doing now? I'm **trying** to put my glasses on. And as long as I can hold them out there, I can stand here all morning and **try** to put my glasses on. And as long as I'm **trying** to put my glasses on, I don't have to **put** my glasses on! I can always tell you: "Don't you see I'm **trying** to put my glasses on?" And as long as I **try**, I don't have to **do**. Guilt, and trying, can immobilize us to the very **changes** we need, like Lt. Onoda meeting his commanding officer and laying down his rifle, to experience the end of the struggle with sin.

How then do we experience the "pardon" part of "Verdict: Guilty but Pardoned?" First, we can hear again the Gospel message: "God loves us." Dr. Karl Barth was one of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He stood against the Nazis when they tried to compromise the German church with Nazi values. He, along with Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer who I mentioned in today's "Grace Notes" and who gave his life for Christ, led the

opposition with its 1934 Barmen Declaration. Best known for his seminal work, Church Dogmatics, he was once asked to summarize the millions of words in that voluminous work. He thought a moment and said, *“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”* We receive pardon in a person, Jesus Christ.

Second, we turn toward new life: repentance, *metanoia* in the Greek, literally, “a turning.” A 180 degree turn. A radical change. John Wesley once received a long letter from one of his preachers, lamenting all the difficulties of his parish and people. Mr. Wesley is reported to have sent back a letter that bore this simple sentence: *“You look inward too much, and upward too little.”* Repenting, changing, is ultimately about looking up to God in Christ.

Last, we receive the “pardon” part of “guilty, but pardoned” when we realize that reconciliation is ours, for the asking and for the living. It’s what the Lord’s Prayer means when we pray, *“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Reconciliation is coming home: coming home to God. The Hebrew people had a special year for it, called the Year of Jubilee. Once every 50 years, people didn’t have to plant. They left their fields and went to the home of their upbringing. The family gathered as a large, extended family once again. Debts were forgiven and slaves given their freedom.

Charles Wesley wrote our closing him today about this year of jubilee. But here’s the really good news: we don’t have to wait 50 years. Some of us won’t make it if we do! Every year, and month and week and day we can be reconciled and restored! Whether we come to the altar today in body or spirit or both, know that the year of Jubilee is now. God’s pardon is poured out for you and me! God cares about us personally! As Wesley declared:

*Blow ye the trumpet, blow! The gladly solemn sound  
Let all the nations know, to earth’s remotest bound.  
The year of jubilee is come! The year of jubilee is come!  
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home.*