When things get repeated a lot there is a danger that we will not only ignore the statement, but also the reality that such a statement is conveying. Such is the sentence in today’s Gospel where we hear, “John saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, ‘Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” On some level we know that it is an important statement; I mean it’s in the Eucharistic prayer after all. And we know that this taking away sins business is fairly central to Christianity, but why is it so important? There is the basic answer, which says that sin is what separates us from God and without that being removed we cannot be in communion with Him. And that is a very good answer — if you gave this answer in Sunday School you would be rewarded with a gold star and maybe even a commemorative David Hasselhoff t-shirt (I used to have one, it said “Don’t Hassle the Hoff”). But as good as this answer is I want to focus on a less divine aspect of the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That is I want to think about it not in terms of how it affects our relationship with God but rather how it affects our relationship with others and with ourselves.

Now in full disclosure, I have tended to stay away from such topics because we live in such therapeutic times where everything’s worth is measured by what it does for us or how it makes us feel. And so the danger is when we add Jesus into this mix he can become just one more author in the self-help section. And so my hesitancy has been about making Jesus appear as someone who is around to merely fixing our problems on earth by boosting our self-esteem or giving us the confidence to ask for a raise. Jesus is not about superficial fixes. He is not going to make you look ten years younger or give you a thick luscious head of hair (believe me, I have tried). And so when we talk about what Jesus does through the forgiveness of sins we are talking about a fix that puts us at unity with the creator and sustainer of the universe, which thereby puts us at peace with our fellow man and with ourselves.

You see sin is a very strange thing because on one level we want to do it, but at the same time once we have done it we find ourselves alienated from not just God but from others and from ourselves as well. Now just for a quick refresher; sin is loving something or someone more than God and this is alienating because it reverses the order of how things are supposed to work. It is not that we are not supposed to love God’s creation its just that we are not supposed to love it as much or more than God. It is about proper ordering. This is a silly example but when we learn to drive we start on a quiet road in the suburbs not on the Dan Ryan expressway. Similarly, we must first love God because it is only through that love that we are able to fully love others and ourselves. The order matters a whole lot. But the thing with sin is that it puts us on the Dan Ryan Expressway, without having first learned in the quiet suburbs. And so when John speaks of Jesus taking away the sin of the world he really talking about putting things back in order. And things are put back in order three ways: taking away the sin that alienates us from God, taking away the sin that alienates us from one another and taking away the sin that alienates us from ourselves. I already said I was going to skip the first one so let’s jump into how sin alienates us from one another.

When we sin we are operating in the world in a way that runs contrary to God’s will and since we are created in the image of God our sins also alienate us from one another. Just for an obvious example of how this works let’s say I break the “thou shall not steal” commandment. I decide I don’t like my car, but am too cheap to get a new one, so I decide it will just be easier to take my next-door neighbor’s car. For a moment let’s ignore me going to jail and having my picture splashed all over the tabloids under headlines like, “Pilfering Priest pinches Pontiac” and just focus on my relationship with my neighbor. It is going to change and probably for the worse because the element of trust has been violated in our relationship and the only way for that relationship to be restored will have to be through my neighbor acting in accordance with God’s will and forgiving me. That is the line in Lord’s Prayer where it says, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” God forgives so that we may also forgive. Christ takes away the sin, but we must also participate in that reality by forgiving those who trespass against us, so that forgiveness is fully realized here on earth.

Now let’s move on to the other piece I talked about and that is the relationship we have with ourselves. This may sound a little odd because we tend to think of sin as harming our relationship with God and with each other but how does it harm us? Well let’s talk about harm for a moment. There is a school of morality that is kind of the default for many people these days which posits that as long as no one is harmed then any action is justifiable. And generally by no one being harmed we mean that no one gets shot or falls into a wood chipper. But harm is much bigger thing than that. The scars that many people carry with them are not physical but are emotional. Much of what haunts us are either things that we have had done to us or things we have done to others which leave no physical marks but rather leave shame, guilt, anger, sadness and frustration. And these past sins of ours linger and torment us because the forces that rebel against God are able to convince us that Jesus did not really die to forgive our sins. Sure maybe he died for other people’s sins, but ours are in a special category – a category that allows us to sit around and lament and relive all the wrongs that have happened in our lives. And this is bad because it prevents us from growing in God. If all we do is ponder what we have done wrong we are not moving forward. Living a life of nostalgia for past wrongs not only prevents our relationship with God from moving forward but also prevents us from living in the joy that God promises us and denies that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. If I were a different kind of preacher this would be the point where I would make all of you stand up, hold hands and repeat “God has forgiven me,” but I’m not so if you want this you will have to go home and do it in front of a mirror. But just because we are not going to make this into a public spectacle does not mean that it is not true. Jesus does take away the sins of the world, meaning that the past is truly behind us. We need to remember to forgive ourselves, because God does and by not doing so we are saying that God’s grace may be sufficient for others but not for ourselves.

So when John declares, “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” he is declaring that all of the stuff that prevents us from being fully in relationship with God, with others and with ourselves has been dealt with. We are not being held back by things in the past but rather can move forward toward loving God, one another and ourselves and growing in God’s likeness this day and forevermore.