For fun I thought that I would spend this morning reflecting on the concept of sin...so prepare for a sizeable serving of jocularity. Sin, at its most basic, is defined as missing the mark. Put another way sin is when we do an action that is considered wrong according to the tenants of Christianity. But the idea of missing the mark is not something that is unique to Christianity. All religions, cultures and subcultures have an idea of how things should be and so by default have a concept of sin, even if they do not call it that. C.S. Lewis said, “A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.” Sin is this crooked line. It is the thing people look at and say that this action or behavior does not meet the standard. These cultural sins can be things as seemingly small as politicians not wearing an American flag lapel pins or tech entrepreneur not owning a grey Patagonia Synchilla Vest. But they can also be large like being a racist or serial killer. There are expected patterns of behavior everywhere and where there are expected behaviors there are, of course, violations of those rules.

These violations lead to a second layer of the system and that has to do with what we are supposed to do when we or someone else has committed a sin or violation of the rules. That is how do we get things back to being right. If you think of it like taking a wrong turn when driving, the way that you fix the problem is to turn around. Cultures have developed elaborate rituals to make things right that have gone wrong. Some are pretty mild like an apology or some public service work while others are pretty extreme like human sacrifice or Soviet show trials. But whatever the resolution there is some sort of action required to fix the problem that was created. If you have ever watched a politician or public figure apologize for some unseemly action you have witnessed a ritual meant to fix the sin that they have perpetuated. It might involve biting the lower lip, a few tears or a shaky voice but whatever happens it is meant to restore order. Figuratively speaking society has developed actions that are meant to fill the hole that an individual has dug.

Now let’s bring this discussion back to on of the reasons you come to church and that is to better understand what it means to be a Christian (at least I hope at least one of the reasons you come to church). In Christianity sin features very prominently. It shows up just one chapter after humanity enters the scene meaning we did not waste a lot of time in getting around to sinning. Now while any society or culture can, in Lewis’ terms define what a straight line is, we as Christians make a very specific claims about straight lines and who gets to define it. Our claim is that God has defined right behavior and that sin is a violation of God’s commands. God has ordered the universe in a certain way and violation of this order is called a sin. There is also a further claim that we make in regards to God’s rules and how we know them. We read it today in Jerimiah when we hear, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” So, what in generic terms we call our conscience actually comes from God placing his law in our hearts. In other words, with the coming of Christ we don’t need to read in the Ten Commandments that murder is a bad thing to do, rather we know it instinctually. And the reason we know this is because the way God wants the universe to be ordered is now inside of us, we know it in the same way that we know we love our children or spouse.

So far so good, but there is of course a problem. For as you may have noticed we Christians still do a fair amount of sinning. We may know what is right but we so often do what is wrong, be it gossip, lack of charity, covetousness or anything else you want to name. Which means that we are still left the problem. And that problem is how do we set things right when we have sinned. And even though we have not gotten to Easter the texts today are full of explanations of how things are put back to right. In the text from Jeremiah God says, “I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.” In Hebrews we hear “having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” and in John’s Gospel we hear Jesus say, “when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” The answer, like most questions that are asked in church, is Jesus.

And we know how it works. We will hear it in our Eucharistic prayer in a few minutes when I say, “by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we, and all thy whole Church, may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion.” Jesus died for our sins. We have heard it all before, yet I think we forget the power that is in it. I would argue that most of the problems in this world come when people create their own systems by which to resolve perceived transgressions against themselves. Some of these are extreme like Osama bin Laden justifying the September 11tth attacks because US troops were in Saudi Arabia and some of these are more pedestrian like my friend Ida damaging her ex-boyfriend’s car because he was cheating on her. But what we hear from God today is that he will take care of it. He has created both an order of behavior and a system that resolves violations to this order of behavior, i.e., sins. Because God has written his laws on our hearts we know when something is not right, but without God we do not have the power to make things right again. And sadly we often forget this.

In the Lord’s Prayer we say forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. What this tells us is that in the same way God forgives sins against him (which is all of them) we, on a smaller scale need to forgive those sins that are committed against us. We can get legalistic and withhold our forgiveness to those who have not asked for it but really it will not do a whole lot of good. There is an old cliché which says refusing to forgive is like drinking poison in the hopes that the other person will die. God can forgive all day long but until we grab ahold of that forgiveness and make it our own, we will continue living in a world of animosity, a world where we get to decide what is required to make the world right again. And since we live in a fallen world there are plenty of things to hold onto. Being both Scottish and Armenian I come from a proud race of people who like to hold grudges – just ask me what I think about the Turks or Irish Whiskey. But I have to admit that it isn’t good for me. Spending time being upset about past infractions might make me feel good in the way righteous indignation can make one feel good, but it does nothing to help me to grow in my love and affection for God. Our systems for dealing with earthly sins will always be earthly. They will keep our gaze on the creation and not the creator. Yes, we know that there are right ways to live and yes, we know that there will be violations of these rules. But unless we accept what God has done about it and live in this new reality, we will not be able to fully be God’s own this day and forevermore.