I’d like to talk about sin today. When I say that, maybe you sort of get on edge a little bit. And I don’t blame you if that happens. There was at times, a kind of mean spirited Lutheranism in our past, that shamed you for being a sinner. Shame on you. Sin became associated with a kind of scolding. The whole subject became associated I think pretty much with the angry parent coming after you and you’re going to get it. And you know, you got it. And then you came to church and learned that God felt the same way about you. In fact, and I heard this other day from a Lutheran pastor on television, you deserve death and hell, and save for Jesus that’s where you would be. I think it’s what causes the little ones to stumble in our lesson today. It’s basically shaming people that causes them to stumble. No wonder we get on edge and avoid the subject. Who wants to get shamed?

A couple of generations ago, many people in the church began to realize that shaming people was very destructive. Shame is the core of all addiction of course. And this is a little oversimplistic, but along with the self-esteem movement many in the church began the process of trying to sort of not talk about sin too much. Let’s place the emphasis on God’s love. You need to build people up, not tear them down with talk about sin. So let’s welcome everyone, lets’ be nice, let’s nurture people with care and tell them how wonderful they are instead; how much God loves them. People still spoke of sin, but it was toned down. Sin became something like being naughty, a kind of childish category. There were some churches that tried to keep the shaming up, really serious about sin, but the real sin was virtually always somewhere else. Out in society. Look at the terrible cities, or terrorists in Afghanistan, or drug users. The old shaming tradition didn’t, and so many churches still continue to heap shame and on divorced people, gay people, or secular humanists, or “those terrible people” somewhere else.

Now shaming people is back in style. You see in in politics now as politicians point their fingers at their opponents and literally shame them. It’s the old preaching coming back in secular form. You should be ashamed. People go to school board meetings now and literally point their fingers at the board members and shame each one for making a student wear a mask. Shame on you. It’s very personal, and the deepest of rejection. This is the stumbling block folks

We need to think this through, think about sin in a different way. Because without sin, our faith doesn’t mean much. There are all kind of groups that we can join that will be welcoming, friendly, nurturing, loving, kind. You can get that in bowling league or a motorcycle club. I’ve gone cycling with a group down in Marysville. Terrific. It is a ministry, it brings life. And I’m not saying that this is not a part of what it means to be the people of God. But without sin folks, we sunk. Put a fork in it, we’re done. We’re just another friendly club. And the best theologians of our church today are tracing the decline of the church, directly, to the trivialization and downplaying of the reality of our sin. We are sinners and if we don’t understand what that means we can’t connect to God. Or each other. There is no new life that can happen in us, no fire of the Spirit, no transformation of our hearts, until we grasp well the sin that we have. Because that’s where God meets us.

But we cannot be shaming people anymore. Shame on you has to go. Once in a while you see a person who gets it. It’s like someone who loves to play basketball or any sport. How are they going to improve? Well, someone is going to have to come along, maybe a good coach. And they’ll say, we’ll here is where you need to improve. You’re not doing this right. You need to find out where you’re missing the mark so you can be a better player. Missing the mark has been the classic definition of sin. Without being able to figure out where you’re messing it up, you not going to get anywhere.

Now sin in the spiritual life is a little darker than that. Sin is serious, our separation of God has tragic consequences. But as we approach the subject we need to do it with hope, not shame. Do you want to have a better relationship with God and other people? Well, here’s what keeping you down. We need to understand our sin well. If you’re in a shame based sin system what you do is “try not to sin” that’s your approach. I’ll try not to blow it. I’ll try not to do anything wrong. You’re just walking on eggshells all the time. Is this a sin? Is that is sin? You’re trying to find out what you can get away with. I’m just trying to stay out of trouble. That is the stumbling. That’s a surefire way to know that you come out of a shame based system of thinking about sin.

We have to resist this, fight it. No. Sin, rightly done, is a form of hope. I want to know where I’m blowing it, I want to find it in me, because I want to be better at life. Please God, tell me where I’m missing the mark, so I can do better. Finding out about your sin can be understood as a gift. I want to understand this. Yeah, it can be rough. It will humble you to some degree. But it makes you real. And that’s where you begin to learn about love. We’re with each other in the struggle. And that’s where things start getting good. Otherwise, we’re the good religious people and the bad people sitting down at the bar. At that point, all is pretty much lost.

So what is it? What is sin? I’m not even going to try to give you a final definition of sin. Because it takes a lifetime to explore what sin is, and it comes in many forms, it’s a slippery thing. The traditional answer is “missing the mark” but what does that mean? You have to get more specific. I’ve been teaching about sin in confirmation and what I tell the students is that what I’m going to give them is not the whole thing, but one very specific thing that will help get them get started. And it’s specific for that age group and time in life. So I’m telling them this fall that for now, just think about sin as put downs. Putting people down. In the Bible and Luther’s catachism that would breaking of the 5th and the 8th commandments. But then you have explore it. Where does that come from? These put downs. Why do I do that? And if you trace that back in your own heart and discover where that need comes from, you would be well on your way to a very beginning of understanding of what sin is. Why do I need to hurt people? That’s a good question. It’s just the beginning, but at least your in the game. It’s not the external. It’s not somewhere else. Sin has to do with why you do what you do? It’s something about you, not your actions. It’s not about your behavior. It’s about who you are as a person. What is that? Well, that’s what we’re getting at by the word sin. And there are a lot of different entry points into beginning to learn about this. My hunch is that if you dug deep enough into this stumbling you would get to shame again. Shame on you. You got that, and now your just passing on to someone else.

Our Green Book worship begins with an understanding of sin. We confess every week that we haven’t loved God with our whole heart and our neighbors as ourselves. That’s true, it’s so true, but to my thinking it’s too vague at this point, too easy to weasel out of. I think we need to be a lot more direct with people and find something that cuts through better than that. For me, at this point in history I think the best way to think about sin in our setting is to think about sin as the desire to be right. I want to say I’m right and you’re wrong. Right now we are a very partisan people. So when we’re debating and arguing about issues, about politics, or even what is the fastest way to get to Beatrice going past the Community College or the garbage dump, I have this need to be right. You could say righteous. What’s that about? It’s really destructive. Just watch some religious person who thinks they’re right and everybody else is wrong. See what kind of person they become. And you will know a great deal about what we mean in our tradition by the word sin. Dig down in your own soul to the source and what will you find. My guess is that it’s shame again. Shame on you. I’m ashamed to be wrong so I have to be right. What tears us apart more than our arguments about who is right? And what brings us together more than when we can admit where we’ve been wrong? Sin prevents you from being honest and real.

Our Lutheran tradition understands sin, as the desire to justify ourselves by our good works. This has a lot of applications but in general this has to do with the desire to keep up appearances. What will the neighbors think? I live in a world, in a community that judges me according to “what I make of myself” for example. So I put on a good show, so that people will be impressed with me. I need the right make up, the right credentials, the right car, I always have to look good, and my kids have to look good too, or I feel what? Yes, ashamed. This fear of being flawed, or weak, or failing has a great deal of control over my life. One of the classic verses that describes sin in Scripture is 1 john 2:15-16. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride of in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. What is lust of the flesh? First of all this has very little to do with my sexuality. That’s a whole different subject that really gets shamed, don’t have time for that today. But the lust of the flesh is “I can do it on my own power—I don’t need any help. It’s the illusion of self sufficiency.” The self made man or woman. What is the lust of the eyes? To put on a good appearance, already talked about that. Boy I’ve got it together. Pride in riches, well that just tops off everything that make me look good. And that blossoms into arrogance, haughtiness the bible says, and that nice ability to sort of look down your nose on those who are beneath you. Trace all that back, dig in to your own heart and what will you find. Yup. Shame. Shame on you. See and this is why sin can be the source of so much hope. Because you start getting out from underneath that shame, that shaming, and it’s like being raised from the dead.

Notice if you will that sin in the Christian tradition at least looks really impressive. My Luther professor at seminary always said, that the sinner always wants to look like a big saint. You may be wondering why I’m not speaking about all the bad people like drug users and criminals and calling that sin out. Pornography, violence and sex in movies, and all usual litany. The reason is simple. Those are not good things and are surely a manifestation of sin. But dig back through those and what you find? Shame. Shame is the source of just about all sin. Before sin came into the world, Adam and Eve were what the Bible says. Naked and not ashamed. After the stumbling there came the shame. That’s why they had to put on clothes and hide themselves. They were ashamed. There it is.

If you read the the story of Jesus you will discover that those “bad” people were not the big problem. The real sin resided in the good people, who followed all the laws, and looked really good. But something got into them. They didn’t want to look at their sin. And so they always seemed to locate the real problem outside of themselves. They loved to put people down and thought they alone were right. And so they missed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners. Because they just couldn’t bear to be one themselves. Shame kept getting in the way. So they missed life and what it means to be loved. What it means to be free.

Sin is one of the greatest gifts we have in the church. Because once we start getting a handle on it, the Spirit transforms it. It no longer separates us, it binds us together in love. We starting to own it and work on it. We’re starting to get real. There is hope for something better.

Amen.