

How We Push Water Uphill - a sermon on sin
preached by Pastor Mark Harris to the First Church in Jaffrey on Sep. 6th, 2026

Please pray with me: God, we thank you for the gift of science. We thank you for the blessings of understanding Your Creation. Please also grant us the wisdom to apply those understandings with our whole minds, our whole hearts, and our whole souls. Amen.

Sin is a difficult concept for the progressive church. For those who remain entrenched in the idea that Christianity is a prescription of moral guidelines and prohibitions, sin is easy. Do what God tells us to do, and not what God says not to do. Otherwise, you are sinning. Of course, that understanding is also dependent upon you accepting, usually without question, their interpretation of what God tells us to do and what God prohibits.

In more progressive circles, and in the Main Line Protestant denominations, like the UCC, there has come to be a popular definition of sin that tries to subtly change this narrative. Many times in Seminary and since, I have heard it used. Perhaps you've heard it too. The phrase is that sin is separation from God. Well frankly, I don't find that very satisfying either. My principle difficulty with this definition is that it uses what most of us acknowledge as undefinable - God - in the definition. You don't need a logical genius to tell you that defining something with an undefinable term isn't really defining it at all.

So where do we go from here? I had a good friend named Chet, whose hand I held up to the point that he left this world for the next. We talked for hours on many subjects. I think because of where he was when I got to know him well, which was only a few months from his passing on, we talked often of God and souls and sin and grace. I had a way of talking about these things that he appreciated. I often think of the wholeness of the living world as water. Water falls from the sky at different rates and to different places, but it progresses from the place it falls in the same universal direction - towards the ocean. If the ocean is God, then every drop of water, even if very slowly, is making inexorable progress towards rejoining with the divine. One drop may fall upon the rocky summit of our mountain, and slowly descend, traversing pools and streams and raging rivers before it rejoins the great confluence. Another might fall directly from the sky into the middle of the sea.

In this understanding, then, sin is water moving uphill. It is the subversion of our natural progression, which is difficult, but achievable, and slows the progress of our souls. It is a deliberate turning away from the collective progress of humanity. At my first dinner at Rivermead, one of those gathered spoke of the coming singularity. This is the concept that the combination in computational capacity could so enhance human intelligence that our advancement would explode exponentially. One of the ways that we can be sure to avoid this seemingly desirable acceleration, in my opinion, is to approach it solely with our minds.

I think we may agree in this group that the instruments contained in these boxes on top of our necks were granted us to use, in conjunction with other instruments, mainly this one (heart) begin to understand what's actually going on in this world and life. However blunt or sharp, these brains allow us to reason and reach conclusions. And yet, I see so many examples in our society of these brains being used deliberately and directly to subvert the understandings granted to us by our hearts. This practice can only ensure that our progress is stunted, and that its character becomes mechanical and devoid of compassion. This falls squarely into my definition of sin.

I'll try an example. The new field of epigenetics has revealed that we continually alter each other's genetic material in every interaction, however subtly. Our genes are not written in stone, but rather subject to our environments. This new science has shown this most frequently by showing how parent's and caregiver's trauma can affect the genetics and realities of the children they care for, but it should be obvious from this example that the effect is just as potent positively as it can be negatively.

Of our six children, five were adopted, all from different circumstances, all at different ages. Our eldest daughter, Gwen, is my biological daughter from a previous marriage. Can you explain to me why it happens quite regularly that I hear my second to youngest daughter, Lydia, in the next room and could swear that a Gwen, 14 years younger than she is at this point must be the one in there? Lydia was born in Virginia of two biological parents who were African American. They are not even the same race, if you choose to use that human construct that was created as an excuse to treat people differently. I wish I had recordings of their voices to play for you, but trust me, they sound exactly the same. Both of them grew up with Angela and I as parents. They have our expressions and our micro-expressions. They have our phraseology and our word choices. They are sisters, without question.

Many families use terminology when introducing or talking about family members like half-sibling or adopted sibling. These are nods to the concept of biological relationships. In fact, we have used the term biological daughter in this very sermon already. We use it to mean providing genetic influence through conception, but we have already identified that there are many other ways that we influence each other, even at a genetic level. Having the same parents, and spending so much time together, Gwen and Lydia are indeed biological siblings. They have, by our understanding of epigenetics, altered each other's genetic expression, and have both been influenced heavily by Angela and I, both socially and genetically. So perhaps we should use a different term. Gwen is my daughter through conception, rather than biologically.

When I was at Salem, I officiated the marriage of a man to a woman who'd had a child in high school. They had been together for some time, and he had always treated this little girl as his own. Meanwhile the man who had genetically influenced her through conception had never had anything to do with her since that hasty act. If the preference of our society is to be believed, that absentee parent somehow had more to do with who this little girl was than the man who by every right she calls her Dad. I have a choice word to say about that, but I'll leave it unsaid out of politeness. It has an exclamation point after it, though.

Another example of sin. I had a cardiac arrest at the age of 45 and was found to need a quadruple bypass operation. During my recovery, I was given ample advice about my lifestyle, my diet, my weight, and pretty much every other aspect of my life. Much of it was preaching to the choir. I knew that I was overweight. I knew that my diet wasn't perfect. Etcetera. I also knew that I had Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from years of abuse as a child, and that I had been in therapy of some kind since I was 16.

The Adverse Childhood Experience Study done by Kaiser-Permanente in California in the late 1990's showed an undeniable and striking correlation between childhood trauma and adult disease, specifically the cardiac and hyperlipidemic diseases that I suffered from. Not one doctor spoke with me about therapy, though. Not one doctor asked a single question about my history. Even though my therapeutic history was in my charts, it was never referenced nor questioned during my treatment. How can we be so advanced in our medical technology, and yet ignore the realities right in front of our faces? That, to me, is sin.

Read Dr. Gabor Mate's book, *When The Body Says No*, or Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps The Score*, for excellent elaborations on the long term effects of trauma, especially childhood trauma. We have proceeded incredibly quickly in our methods of medical treatment, but it seems like we have done so without the use of our hearts or compassion for the most part. This is an illustration of how we push water uphill. We can see what is right in front of us, that our emotional and psychological health are just as important as the physical, and yet we close our eyes, and continue to treat symptoms, rather than the trauma at the root of our dysfunctions.

I cannot deny that the medical treatment that I received saved my life, and I wouldn't want to. Nor would I deny the benefits of the medications I have been put on to improve my conditions, including the Effexor that has tamped down many of my CPTSD symptoms. I will say that I am in what is possibly the best overall health in my life at the age of 55, and, while that is due to the second chance that open heart surgery gave to me, it is also largely due to the continued work that I have done with therapists, and on my own to recover from the effects of childhood trauma. Without that work, I would not be here before you today. I would not have been able to change careers and become your Pastor.

Even if we dislike the terminology, sin abounds in our society. We treat addiction as a lifestyle choice, rather than a disease. We expect kids who grow up in neighborhoods that look like war zones to "get over it" and persevere. We call soldiers paralyzed by flashbacks that they're cowards. Understanding that what our hearts tell us is also true is not a weakness. Admitting that traumatic pasts need to be addressed is not giving certain people bonus points. It's realizing that we all need to move forward together, and that some of us may need to address past harms in order to do so. And that's in all of our interests, however we are related. And I assure you that we are all related.

Amen.