

"WHATEVER BECAME OF SIN?"

INTRODUCTION

The title of today's sermon is taken from a book by the same name. The book caught my eye one day recently as I walked by the Marboro Bookstore. There it was, displayed in a prominent position in the window, next to a book entitled, "The Joy of Streaking". Who knows, maybe that's why it caught my eye. I purchased the book - the one on sin, that is, and would recommend it to you. "Whatever Became of Sin?"

To me, one of the most important things about this book which launches today's sermon is the man who wrote it. A theologian or a preacher could write a book on the subject, "Whatever Became of Sin?" and it wouldn't startle many. But when a physician whose name is respected in the field of mental health asks such a question as the title of this book, that catches our attention.

Dr. Karl Menninger was the founder of the psychiatric center bearing the family name in Topeka, Kansas. Together with his father and his brother - and later his son and his nephews - he has developed this center for mental health, which has brought healing and hope to many troubled persons. He's written a number of books on mental health, but in this one he is concentrating on moral health - not as a separate subject, but as a twin subject. His book is timely.

DEVELOPMENT

One of the early chapters in the book is entitled, "The Disappearance of Sin: An Eyewitness Account" - and he chronicles the gradually vanishing use of the word or concept of sin from his lifetime. I think it's an account that many of us could confirm from our own observations. There was a time when this word "sin" was a proud and awesome word, and when it was spoken in the pulpit or in private conversation, it carried a tremendous weight of moral judgement behind it. But now this word is less frequently spoken in the pulpit or in public utterance. If we use the word in conversation, it's generally spoken half-jokingly and self-indulgently as far as our own mis-steps are concerned and tolerantly as far as the mis-deeds of others are concerned.

It reminds me of the preacher who one Sunday morning with a twinkle in his eye greeted one of his parishoners with the remark, "Why, my dear, if I known you were in the congregation, I'd have said something about sin in the sermon!"

Dr. Menninger is concerned about the disappearance of the name and the notion of sin. He devotes only a few pages documenting the assertion that something is tragically wrong with our world, our nation, and ourselves. Certainly any day's newspaper or newscast will provide that kind of documentation. But he spends more pages detailing the strange disappearance of sin as a vital term and a valid truth in understanding our suffering - both collective and personal.

For example, he recalls that more than 20 years ago, in 1952, Congress voted to require the President to proclaim each year a national day of prayer. President Truman began it that year, but in only one of the annual presidential proclamations has there been any mention of the word "sin". And that was in the quiet decade of the 50's - in 1953 - when President Eisenhower borrowed the words for his proclamation from a call issued by Lincoln in 1863:

"It is the duty of nations as well as of men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow, yet with assured hope that genuine repentance will lead to mercy and pardon".