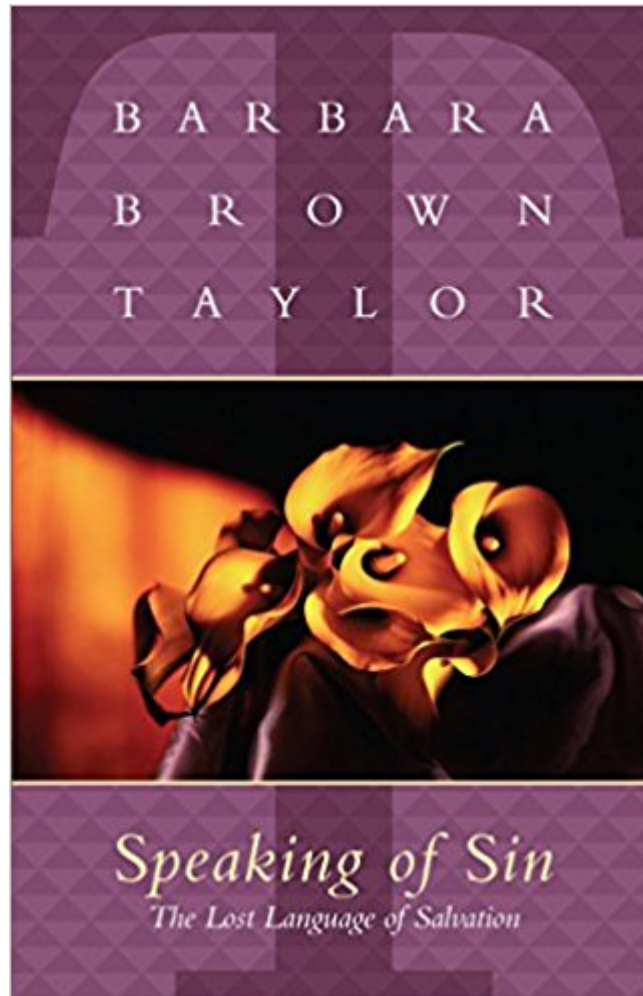




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Speaking Of Sin: The Lost Language Of Salvation



Synopsis

In *Speaking of Sin*, Barbara Brown Taylor brings her fresh perspective to a cluster of words that often cause us discomfort and have widely fallen into neglect: sin, damnation, repentance, penance, and salvation. She asks, "Why, then, should we speak of sin anymore? The only reason I can think of is because we believe that God means to redeem the world through us." Abandoning the language of sin will not make sin go away. Human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation and death no matter what we call them. Abandoning the language will simply leave us speechless before them, and increase our denial of their presence in our lives. Ironically, it will also weaken the language of grace, since the full impact of forgiveness cannot be felt apart from the full impact of what has been forgiven. Contrary to the prevailing view, Taylor calls sin "a helpful, hopeful word." Naming our sins, she contends, enables us to move from "guilt to grace." In recovering this "lost language of salvation" in our worship and in the fabric of our individual lives, we have an opportunity to "take part in the divine work of redemption."

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Customer Reviews

'In the age just past, nationalism has brought us Hitler, science has brought us the atom bomb, and religion has brought us some really awful television programming.' So quips the inimitable Barbara Brown Taylor in a new book on a topic most of us think we've heard quite enough about already: sin. In the age just past, Brown Taylor gave us a half dozen of the best sermon collections any of us

have ever read. I, for one, think of her as Barbara Emerson Fosdick, and seldom preach any gospel lesson without first consulting her. . . . She has given us a wonderful reflection on science as it related to religion (*The Luminous Web*) and now this slim volume on transgression: *Speaking of Sin*. But who needs it? All of us, especially lectionary preachers who are called upon, from time to time, to reflect honestly about a tricky subject to which our Bible is replete with references. . . . Those who look into Brown Taylor's books of sermons with an appreciation for her poetry will not be disappointed. Her section on sin in *'Genesis,'* ch. 2, is alone worth the price of the book. . . . The book is an insightful delight. There is plenty here for the preacher to glean from and any Christian concerned in the least about ethics to be instructed by. To buy such a book and not to read it would be a well-earned sin. (Scott Dalgarno *The Presbyterian Outlook*) In this provocative book, Taylor offers a substantive argument that some of the great words of our religious tradition cannot be replaced. There are no substitutes for them, and when we try to talk around them, we find our speech diminished. Rather than ignoring or sanitizing such words we need to go diving for the core experiences these words describe. When we do that, we may just discover that an unpopular term like 'sin' may turn out to be the very one we need to reclaim. (Rev. Dr. Wayne A. Holst, the University of Calgary *Western Catholic Reporter*) Barbara Brown Taylor, noted author, teacher, preacher and priest of the Episcopal Church, has a gift for writing simply and profoundly. In this book she brings those gifts to bear on a subject that unfortunately receives very little balanced treatment from either the study or the pulpit. She argues convincingly that many preachers have adopted, and their listeners accepted with ease, either the 'legal' or the 'medical' model of sin. In so doing, the real intent of Holy Scripture has been impoverished and its more hopeful and life-giving message of pardon and repentance ignored. . . . I highly recommend this slim yet deep volume for any Christian concerned with amendment of life. (Rev. Carlton F. Kelley, priest-in-charge of St. Paul's Church)

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest. She holds the Harry R. Butman Chair in Religion and Philosophy at Piedmont College in northeastern Georgia and serves as adjunct professor of Christian spirituality at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur. Recognized as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language by Baylor University in 1995, Taylor has published numerous collections of her sermons and theological reflections, including *Mixed Blessings*, *The Preaching Life*, *The Luminous Web*, *The Preaching Life*, *Bread of Angels*, and *Gospel Medicine*.

When a "liberal" argues for the recovery of the language of "sin" and "salvation", you notice. And

when she titles a chapter, "Sin: Our Only Hope," you want to read further if only to find out what her counter-intuitive, contrarian angle is. It turns out that her perspective is a very insightful one. Taylor acknowledges that the popular notion of sin needs to be jettisoned -- it is itself sinful, you might say -- but not the fundamental concept of something being seriously wrong that needs to be righted and that the righting of it involves not just gradual improvement but a transformation of the human spirit that happens when we are in touch with the transcendent in a way that enables us to acknowledge that we've been out of touch with reality in a serious way. As long as we deny that there's anything wrong (recall John Cleese's "It's only a flesh wound"), then we will never seek or be open to a transformation of our fundamental life orientation (hence "Sin is our only hope"). When "sin" disappears from our vocabulary, then what is wrong gets explained in medical therapeutic terms (a "no fault" approach in which we are victims of external forces) or legal terms (an "all fault" approach in which we freely choose to make harmful decisions). Taylor argues that only a depth understanding of "sin" allows for the paradoxical nature of what we're talking about, for the complicity of ego and will in our refusal to acknowledge that anything is wrong, and for the hope of transformation -- not in any neat and simple sense, but in a deep and real sense nonetheless. If there's nothing wrong with you or your life or people who think like you do -- if it's everyone else in the world who's wrong -- then you can skip this book. But if you are among those who are not satisfied with overly simple medical and/or legal explanations of bad acting in our disjointed world and are willing to entertain the notion that in totally rejecting "the language of sin and salvation", we threw the baby out with the bathwater, you might find this a stimulating read.

True, we don't preach about sin and salvation much any more, or at least not in the mainline denominations but it's there in our liturgies. She doesn't seem to understand situation ethics as she suggests that it has done away with the notion of right and wrong, good and evil. Not true. Joseph Fletcher spoke of the lesser of two evils but it was evil nonetheless. She has an amusing story to illustrate the theology of grace trumping sin -- Yale Divinity School had the highest theft rate of any graduate school in the university. She's good on structural sin inasmuch as it applies to America. Her description of the Ash Wednesday is decidedly old-fashioned. The ashing comes in the middle of, not at the beginning of the rite (unless her denomination is also old-fashioned). And she's wrong to say that catechumens joined in the already established Lenten fast. It was the other way round.

Barbara Brown Taylor has never failed to give me new insights on an old subject. She does it again in *Speaking of Sin*. Very enjoyable reading, challenging questions, and down to earth wisdom inform, enlighten, and encourage readers to evaluate and reconsider ancient, traditional, and current understandings/misunderstandings of sin. History and traditions inform the present, which is informing the future now. As the author points out, many of us have avoided speaking of sin, and she offers a treasury of help in confronting the subject, and ourselves.

As always, so good. If you're uninitiated to BBTaylor, check out her sermons on YouTube. You'll know immediately that she has a way with words and ideas and important truths and a rather short book -- loaded with content (as always) and a powerful, meaningful slant on sin. Without leaving you full of guilt -- just a burning desire to absorb the full implications of sin, confession, penance, and salvation.

This book talks about the elimination of the word "sin" in our contemporary language. She addresses what effect this has had on individuals and society. She has a powerful story to tell! I belong to a Unitarian Universalist Church and we practice a modern form of religion. We use wisdom of the past, science, sociology, current events, and our own personal experience to inform us. Due to our modern practice of religion, we have dropped religious language. I do believe in my faith's views and practices, but I think Barbara Taylor is on to something.

This is a hard book to read, to reflect upon, and to commit to acting upon. It is also a hard book to put down, to ignore, and to walk away from without promising to do better it also forced the recognition that I need the grace of God, the power of the Word and the Spirit, and the help of my Christian community.

To my mind and heart, Barbara Brown Taylor is unsurpassed in exploring and elucidating the centralities of Christian faith. Without flourish, she cuts to the center of belief and the essentials of what it means to be a human being in search of truth. The only writer who comes to mind for me as a companion to Brown Taylor is Frederick Buechner. It was a blessed day for me when an acquaintance first mentioned her writings.

I bought several used copies of *Speaking of Sin* for a church Sunday school class. The only problem is that this particular copy was a different edition from the rest and had different page

numbers. Otherwise, the book was in fine condition.

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