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Romans 7:15-25, Matthew 11:25-30
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The Audacity of Sin

A kindergartener at a school in Brooklyn, NY wrote the following story called “The Crazy Motorcycle.” A man bought a motorcycle and for a while all was fine. Then he started to notice that the motorcycle seemed to take on a life of its own. Sometimes when he would turn left the motorcycle would turn right, and when he would turn right the motorcycle would turn left, and when he would go forward the motorcycle would go backward and when he would go backward the motorcycle would go forward. It was a crazy motorcycle. Eventually, he learned to ride it by turning left when he wanted to go right, by turning right when he wanted to go left, and by going forward when he wanted to go backward. For a while this worked until sometimes when he would turn left, trying to go right, the motorcycle would indeed turn left. And when he’d turn right trying to go left, the motorcycle would go left, and sometimes when he went forward wanting to go backward the motorcycle would instead go forward. It was all terribly confusing. Eventually, he got so fed up he took the motorcycle to the dump; when he got there the motorcycle threw him away.

Paul’s experiences his life as something like riding that crazy motorcycle. More specifically Paul senses that he is bound up in something he does not completely comprehend. He even goes so far as to say he does not understand his own actions. Paul says “for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” When I want to turn right I go left and when I want to go forward I go backwards, and this is the life we live. Paul is trying to find language to describe the mystery of sin, and this mystery goes to the very heart of how he understands his life in Christ.

When Christians across the centuries have tried to describe sin, they tend not to go on philosophically about it, but rather they point to the world around them, and to their own lives. Reinhold Niebuhr said sin is the most self-evident of Christian doctrines because it is simply there, the evidence written on the front page of the paper, splashed across the daily news, scrolling at the bottom of the TV set, flashing in our in-boxes, scribbled in the darkness of the human heart.

At the end of the 4th century, the church erupted in controversy when two Christian titans got into a shouting match about the nature of sin. St. Augustine of Hippo was a bishop in North Africa. Pelagius was a British monk. Pelagius said that there is nothing original about sin; rather it is a result of poor choices. Human beings with the freedom of the will given by God have the ability to choose the good. Sin is a product of human endeavor, Pelagius argued. If you want to be good, Pelagius said, simply be good. If you want to be more loving you can be more loving. You have the strength of will within yourself. We might call this the self-help section of the Christian bookstore. Down in North Africa at the time Augustine said, “No, no, no, that cannot be right because I really do want to do good, I really am trying to control my passions, and desires, and instincts, and orient them in the right direction, it’s simply that I cannot do it.” For Augustine says with Paul “I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate.” Thus sin is not merely a matter of making better choices, or exerting the power of my own will over my life, but rather there is something fundamentally wrong, broken, something in me, and indeed in the

whole world, that is distorted and out of whack, some cancer of the soul that has infected the entire cosmos and cannot easily be rooted out; my very will itself is in chaos. Augustine eventually won the day, and helped shape the doctrine that Christians call original sin. Ask any addict if they can self-help themselves out of their addiction. Ask someone who is going through the horror of depression, whose burdens are so heavy they cannot even get out of bed in the morning, if depression is simply a matter of making better choices. Ask someone with an eating disorder if learning to eat well is merely about simply willing oneself to do so. Ask a parent lying awake in the middle of the night, worried about a teenage daughter or son, if good parenting boils down to the “five keys to parental success.” The sentimental platitudes of “try harder,” “don’t give up,” “you can do it,” “fix the problem,” “just say no,” so often fall short, offering empty hope. One of the most important things that Alcoholics Anonymous teaches is that the first step to recovery is to admit that one is powerless, no longer in control.

Paul describes himself in the midst of a terrible catch 22. He is in bondage, and worst of all he is in bondage to the whims and desires, to the fickleness, of himself. How he longs to be set free.

There has been a lot of talk about freedom the last few days over this July 4 weekend. Freedom is a good and important word. Yet freedom in today’s vernacular seems to mean, “I am free to be an individual. I am free to do as I please.” Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and the others, seemed to have a deeper sense of freedom than simply the freedom to do as I please. They seemed to think freedom meant a freedom to participate, some meaningful engagement in the society around them, a freedom to contribute to the common good.

Paul here in Romans wants to nuance this notion of freedom. Paul recognizes that freedom cannot mean, “I am free to do as I choose,” which only means, “I am a slave to myself.” Rather true freedom is found in a different kind of bondage, being bound through grace to Jesus Christ, and it is here where Paul finds his purpose, his joy.

In Matthew’s gospel Jesus is asking people to participate in the kingdom of God, and he’s, well, he’s not having much luck. He says, “To what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.’ Jesus is so exasperated, he calls the crowd a bunch of curmudgeons, a group of killjoys that spurn the invitation to join in a children’s game. “Come on,” Jesus and the children cry, “Come join the fun, come join the dance, listen to the flute, hear the music sound, this is the joy of the kingdom.”

June and July are weddings months around here. I did a wedding last night. Ah, a wedding. Two young people stand up at an altar and they have no idea what they are doing. The bridesmaids and groomsmen ribbing them ahead of time, saying they are giving away their freedom, making tongue and cheek comments about a ball and a chain, about throwing away the key. But the gift of marriage is not giving up one’s freedom; the gift of marriage is discovering the joy of giving oneself completely to one other person, that liberating sense of being vulnerable to one other person, being free to be your very best and your very worst and knowing that your husband or wife has taken a vow to love you anyway – even if they don’t like you all the time. Last night one of the most beautiful parts of the service was the procession of the flower girls. Like the children in Jesus’ parable, they danced down the aisle to the music, throwing rose peddles everywhere, holding hands with each other, smiling, and laughing, grinning from ear to ear, inviting everyone else to join in the party. Those two little girls had it figured out, like the children in Matthew’s gospel. They seemed to understand that a wedding, and not only a

wedding but the whole of our lives with God is reason to dance and sing and play, to take part in the joy of God's kingdom.

Throughout the Bible there is little explanation for sin. There is no clear answer as to why it exists, though it has a lot to do with the way we hurt and injure ourselves, others, and the creation we live within. Most of the scriptures are content to describe all of this in the language of mystery rather than to explain it like a puzzle. God's answer to sin is grace revealed in Jesus Christ, who does not help those who help themselves, but is the help of the helpless, who takes the sins of the whole world into his own broken body, the tragedy of Good Friday being redeemed through joy of Easter resurrection.

Charles Frazier's novel, *Cold Mountain*, set in the North Carolina high country during the Civil War, begins as a story of sin. The lead characters are Ada and Inman, young lovers torn from each other's arms by a war that neither of them really believes in. The drama unfolds in scenes, half set in Black Cove where Ada, a bourgeois preacher's daughter, tries to keep some semblance of her father's farm running to stay alive. The other scenes follow Inman who takes a wound in a firefight someplace in the swamps of Eastern North Carolina, deserts the confederate ranks, and slowly makes his way back home to Black Cove. In the second to last scene, Inman has finally found his way home, when a skirmish breaks out between the people of Black Cove and the remnants of the home guard. After being gone so long, and working so hard to get home, Inman is shot and dies in Ada's arms.

The final scene comes some four years after Inman's death. Peace has returned to Cold Mountain. The sun is shining, the crops are in the field, and yet the scars are everywhere. There is an old woman who no longer speaks, having lost her husband and two sons to the brutality of the home guard. There's a father and daughter, the daughter unforgettably played by Renee Zellweger in the movie. Their relationship has splintered and now father and daughter are reconciling, she cradling her own child in her lap. And there's Ada, who lost her beloved after yearning after him for so long, and Ada's little girl who will grow up without ever knowing her father. What breaks and divides and torments this community is not merely the moral failings of a nation, or individual greed, or misguided patriotism, but the darkest, ugliest side of the human condition, that sense that everything could have been avoided and yet wasn't, that sense that no matter what they did or could have done, the depths of human brokenness would still be there, and they were very much participants in it all.

Cold Mountain doesn't end in death and tears. The story ends at a meal, around a table, where those friends at Black Cove gather together, gaping wounds and all, their anguish ever present. Yet the children are playing in the grass, and there is singing and laughing; hands are held, Ada says the grace, and they eat. The story begins in the depths of human sin, and ends in a dance of joy. It is an image of the kingdom feast, of holy communion, where the wounded saints of God find their freedom in the company of the Lord.

And somewhere, somewhere Jesus says again: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."