

Proper 19, Year C
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The problem with people is that we are made to do good and then we choose not to do it. I have spent some time over the last few days reminiscing on what is now the second half of my life thus far, that part of it lived after the tragedy of 9/11. When I think back on that day 15 years ago and the days which followed, I recall thankfully that almost all of our children and youth were not alive or at least aware of what was happening. But then I look at the news today, I see the pain and suffering of people around the world and in our own backyard, and I realize that while they may not yet know the scale of such tragedy, they are surrounded by the vast scope of the underlying truth that people who are made to do good choose not to do it.

For example, the Israelites today have been given freedom and a future. They have been brought into a very real and present relationship with God. And then when Moses goes off on the mount for a time, they turn away. So often, we are given the opportunity to choose what is right. It may be hard, unpopular, costly, or merely unpleasant. It may be that we are asked to stop rather than go, to listen rather than speak, to follow rather than lead.

But we are a rebellious people. We will not be told what to do. There is a funny and all too accurate trope of telling someone to do something with the express intention of getting them to do the opposite, of telling them they can't do something so that they will. Some call it reverse psychology, but human nature seems more appropriate to me.

Just 12 chapters earlier in Exodus, God gave the Israelites the 10 Commandments, number one of which is "Thou shalt have none other gods but me." Moses goes away, and like a teacher leaving a classroom unattended, the place goes nuts. What's the first thing God told us not to do? Let's do that. This people, chosen by God, saved by God, loved by God, rejects God and disobeys his law....again, because this is not the first time nor will it be the last.

That's the trouble with what is bad or evil or simply what is wrong, it crops up time and again. I am sure that those who lived through Pearl Harbor thought to themselves that never again would America live through such a day of infamy. And as the first and then the second airplane hit the World Trade Center and as a third struck the Pentagon, we were suddenly and deliberately attacked again. And as has happened time and again on a scale both small and great, we were faced with the seemingly impossible task of grappling with the why of it all.

There are no easy answers to this struggle, whether we hone in on the evil of men or step back and look at the whole of creation. There is a truth that feels a little hollow in the shadow of tragedy, and it is that all of creation is made good. Many reject this premise by citing atrocities both natural and manmade. If everything were made good, they say, then such things would not happen. But this is a somewhat naïve version of God and his creation. Speaking from the human perspective, the only way in which God can truly prevent us from committing and experiencing such tragedies is to remove our freedom altogether. As painful as choice can be, its removal from our lives would not be very loving either.

So let's assume for a moment that we are in fact made good. The only way that we know what is good is by having a standard against which all good can be measured, a perfect standard, an unchangeable standard. Well, I know of only one that fits the bill, and it is God. He alone is the source of all being and of goodness. By creating us, he in his perfect goodness makes us good, very good in fact.

By our created nature, by our creatureliness if you will, there is for us the potential of change by virtue of choice. When faced with a decision, we may choose God and his will for us, or we may choose something else,

something less good, something that when held up next to the perfection of God's goodness is in fact evil. Quite simply, anything less than God's will, is evil. And so, perhaps the hardest truth to grasp in all of this is that evil does not exist on its own. Instead, all evil is a lack of something good, a choice to be less godly.

Nothing can be purely evil though. Nothing can entirely cease to be good without ceasing to be altogether. We are made good, and while we may become diminished in that goodness by our sins, deep down there is always, so long as we are alive, some sliver of goodness. There is something redeemable in us all. It may not show itself, it may seem insignificant to the whole of someone's character, but it is there. And because it is there, God can redeem us still. God wants to redeem us still.

There is perhaps no better example in Scripture than that of Paul, who in his letter to Timothy reminds him of how he blasphemed and insulted God, persecuting his church. And yet he was redeemed by the mercy he received, by the grace of the Lord which overflowed for him. Yes, Jesus Christ did come into the world to save sinners, and in Paul, the foremost of sinners, the Lord displays his perfect patience, his perfect love, as an example to all those who believe in him for eternal life.

That's why when Jesus walked this earth he went into the least good places of the day. He hung out with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes. He went to the people who chose the lesser good time and again in their lives in order that he might show them the beauty of holiness, the life-giving goodness of God and God alone. That is why the shepherd runs after the lost sheep, why the woman seeks the lost coin. Redemption is a return to God, a return to the goodness in which we were made, turning towards a goodness greater than ourselves.

What solidified this for me the other day, was a reminder of this two-fold nature of tragedy in our own day. A priest who lived in New York at the time of 9/11 recalled that without forgetting the horrors committed and the death which ensued, the image he has of that day is of the firefighters, the police, the EMTs. When he thinks of a day so dark and painful, he recalls those who brought light and comfort. The very essence of our goodness, of the godliness of humanity, on display in the absolute worst set of circumstances, choosing the good of others before themselves, choosing the lives of others before their own.

The great tragedy of the whole of humanity is that we are created good and at times we choose not to do it, but on days like today, we cannot remember the darkness without also recalling the light. In our own lives we often choose lesser goods over the greatness of God. But when we find ourselves surrounded by pain and suffering facing the certainty of death, there comes running to us through the fire, one who would save us, one who would redeem us. One who stays behind even as he sets us free.

Jesus Christ pursued us into the midst of our sin and its consequences, our rejection of him and of his Father. He walked through the very gates of hell for the likes of you and me, for the likes of days like this. He died and then rose again so that the greatest tragedy of all might be redeemed by the greatest triumph of the whole of humanity.

Here is a true saying and worthy of all men to be received, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.