

The Structure of Faith, Part 2

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

January 17, 2010

Genesis 6:5-8; 8:20-22

God made the world and everything in it good. But almost from the beginning, things went terribly wrong.

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race was on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was nothing but evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was pained. And the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human beings I have created – and not only them, but also the animals and the creeping things and the birds of the air – because I regret that I made them. But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD.

And the LORD God sent a great flood to destroy every living thing. But he spared Noah and his family, along with pairs of every kind of animal, who came with him into the ark and came with him out of the ark.

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. And when the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, because every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.”

Titus 3:1-8a

In the middle of the first century, the Apostle Paul left his young ministry partner Titus on the island of Crete. He gave him a difficult assignment: to bring order out of chaos, the chaos that was the island’s infant church.

Remind the [members of the church] to submit to ruling authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to slander no one, to be peaceable and tolerant, to show every courtesy to all people. We ourselves used to be stupid, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to passions and pleasures of all sorts, living in evil and envy, detestable, hating each other. But when the generous kindness of God our Savior appeared — not because of any righteous deeds we had done, but because of his mercy — he rescued us through a cleansing re-birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out upon us abundantly through Jesus the Messiah, our Savior, so that, having been made righteous by his grace, we might in hope become heirs of the life to come. That’s a statement to trust!

Children’s Story

Last spring, Sammy the Squirrel planted a beautiful flower garden: tall ones and short ones, wide ones and narrow ones, yellow ones and white ones, and more. At least, it was supposed to be a beautiful flower garden.

But more than flowers came up. Weeds came up, too, right alongside the flowers: scraggly ones, crooked ones, prickly ones, ugly ones. Something had gone terribly wrong! Somehow flower seeds and weed seeds had gotten mixed together. And now flowers and weeds were growing together, so close together that Sammy couldn’t pull the weeds out, not without pulling up the flowers, too.

So all last summer, Sammy’s flower garden was a flower and weed garden. He didn’t want the weeds. He hated the weeds. Sometimes all he could see were weeds!

But when he calmed down and looked at his garden more carefully, he could see lots of flowers: white, blue, yellow, red, orange, purple. Just beautiful. Even with all those weeds around.

It’s always a good thing to look for the flowers, even when at first you can’t see anything but weeds.

Sermon

I said last Sunday that exile is a fundamental feature of the human story. We have been banished from where we truly belong. We haven't been able to get ourselves back to the garden.

Five terrifying, gut-wrenching days in Haiti sum up this part of the story. The earth shook and Port-au-Prince crumbled. From the shanty-towns of the poor to the palace of the president, everything collapsed. People died in an instant. Or they slowly expired under the rubble, their worst claustrophobic nightmares a horrifying reality. Willing hands and strong backs proved no match for slabs of concrete stitched together by twisted rebar. Supplies of food, water, and medicine quickly ran out. After the first shock, a deeper despair began to take root, a despair bravely battled by groups of women singing. But thousands and thousands are dead, millions are on the streets. They went nowhere, but they are far, far from home. There's nothing left for them to belong to. They are in misery, and their misery is an exile.

Of course, the world has responded. Search and rescue teams arrived almost immediately. We saw them with their dogs on the news. Military transports have been bringing food and water and other supplies. Hospitals are being set up. Medical teams are deploying. Troops are maintaining order. And commitments have been made to the people of Haiti, commitments for the long term. President Obama has been unequivocal. Former presidents Bush (the second one) and Clinton are lending their support. And other world leaders have made similar commitments.

And then, of course, there's Pat Robertson. The church is a family, and like any other family, you can't pick your relatives. Pat Robertson is our brother in Christ, God love him, but I wish he would shut up. To blame this catastrophe on some supposed pact with the devil — a legend born out of hatred for and fear of an independent, black-majority nation in the Caribbean — that's ignorance at best and malice at worst.

So, what do we have in Haiti? We have the human story at its most tragic: the earth and its inhabitants at odds, and the death toll rising, and the survivors left terrorized by the ground they walk on, and these days sleep on. We also have the human story at its most heartening. Yes, it's hard to make contact. Yes, it's hard to wring out maximum efficiency. But, despite some odd or despicable remarks here and there, the world has responded out of compassion, our of empathy, dare I say it, out of love.

But this can be hard to square with our Scripture and with our Catechism. Both the Scripture, as the sourcebook for our faith, and the Catechism, as an expression of our faith, can be deeply pessimistic.

According to Genesis, people are a mess: "Every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart [is] nothing but evil all the time." But after filtering out the great mass of humanity to preserve only the best of the best? It's no better: "Every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood." Jeremiah has a similar assessment. "The heart is devious above all else," he wrote, "it is perverse — who can understand it?" (17:9) For his part, the Apostle Paul assembles a collection of Old Testament texts into a gloomy indictment:

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one. Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.

Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Romans 3:10-18)

And before we dismiss that as some worst case scenario, listen to how Paul describes himself and his co-workers: "Stupid, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to passions and pleasures of all sorts, living in evil and envy, detestable, hating each other."

The Heidelberg Catechism is no less pessimistic. After asking a question about how we human beings do when it comes to loving God and one another, the Catechism answers this way: "[We] have a natural tendency to hate God and [our] neighbor." (Ans. 5) Hatred, misanthropy, indifference — that's what comes natural to us.

But how do we square this with the last five days? The Scriptures I quoted and the Catechism would lead us to expect an apathetic response, apathetic at best, to the plight of the people of Haiti. A blind and dry eye. Or a sneer. Or a snide remark about letting the dead bury the dead and letting Haitians take care of Haitians. Those texts would not lead us to expect what we have actually seen: genuine concern, genuine compassion, genuine commitment, and honest-to-goodness, “Here we are!” help.

Maybe the Scriptures and the Catechism have got it wrong. That’s not a suggestion you’d expect to hear in a Calvinist church, not in general and certainly not in this particular case. After all, our tradition has always emphasized human sin and corruption, that human beings are warped and twisted, that we are so deeply buried in sin that it has squeezed the life out of us. We are “dead in trespasses and sins,” to quote the Apostle. And so we have a doctrine called “total depravity.”

Now, I was always told to distinguish “total” depravity from “absolute” depravity. We are not absolutely depraved. We are not as bad as we could possibly be. No, we are totally depraved, almost as bad as we could possibly be. You see the difference, I’m sure. With a doctrine like that, you wouldn’t expect to hear from a Calvinist pulpit a question about Scripture and the Catechism and whether they’ve got something wrong in their pessimism about human nature and behavior.

Well, I don’t think they’ve got it wrong. But we may not have it right. I think we sometimes lose sight of the way the Bible often speaks. Often the intention when the Bible speaks is not to declare a fact, but to make a point. And so the Genesis texts do not intend us to hear: “Every single thing that human beings think, say, and do — from top to bottom, from start to finish, from inside to outside — is only and completely wicked and depraved.” Rather those texts intend us to hear something like this: “There is a twistedness that effects just about everything that people do. No one is free of it, not even the best of us.” That’s still pessimistic, but it leaves room for some light at least to shine in the darkness. I think there’s room, on this hearing, for what we’ve seen over the last five days in Haiti, for genuine caring expressed through concrete action.

Not that this lets us off the hook. Just as there’s room for light, despite seemingly impenetrable doctrinal darkness, so there is room, and a need, for some darkness to bring to ground the unbearable lightness of wishful thinking. This, again, is a starting point for faith. Faith recognizes the darkness, darkness all around, darkness within. This is not pessimism, however. This is humility and honesty, an open-eyed assessment of the problem, the kind of assessment that prepares the way for a genuine solution.

So, in ways that really matter, Scripture and the Catechism have got it right. Paul has two lists for Titus, contrasting lists. There’s “the way we ought to be” over against “the way now godly people used to be.” He’s not really clear about the way we are now, but I imagine — actually, I know — it’s somewhere in the middle.

We, of course, like all other people, have our good days and our good moments. Times when we’re courteous to an incompetent sales clerk. Times when we tolerate a daughter’s unusual fashion statement or a husband’s propensity for loudly passing gas. And there are times when we remember to be quiet rather than to spread gossip. There are even times when we reach across cultural barriers to build bridges of understanding rather than ignore someone from another country or of another religion.

But there are other days and other moments, too, that are not so good. We are not free from Paul’s “used to be” list. What blend of stupidity and hatred prompts anyone to locate a trailer park — a ghetto for poor white people — on the Olentangy River flood plain in Delaware County? Go up Route 23 north of Delaware, and there it is. Or how deceived are we when we believe as a simple statement of fact that what’s good for Wall Street is good for all of us? How deceived are we when we believe that government is so corrupt that we can’t do a thing about it, so why try? And how deceived are we when we believe that a “good life for less” is on sale at Walmart — or wherever we may prefer to shop? And we have our problems with hatred. Personal problems, where slights are magnified, grudges nursed, and friendships fractured. And also corporate problems, where ugly words pour from our lips, repeating base stereotypes about blacks, about

Mexicans, about gays, giving no evidence of grace and humility. And we can work our way through the rest of the list.

However, it's not that we are thoroughly and only evil — we and any other human beings. Rather we are a constant mix of good and evil, each rising to the top from time to time. Others have said, and I think this is what Scripture and the Catechism point to, that in every human heart, in every human institution, in every human activity, good and evil are twined together, each having its effect to greater or lesser degree. No human being, no family, no political party, no corporation or industry, no college or university, no people, no nation is purely good or purely evil. We're all a mixed bag. We all have a problem with evil.

But praise God! We are capable of acts of love and compassion. And the people of Haiti desperately need that. But we are also capable of acts of great evil, of greed and selfishness. And so, as sure as night follows day, profiteers will descend on Haiti, too, to deepen the misery. All of this is part of the picture, the human self-portrait, that faith recognizes.

So, now what? Two things at least. First, we will not imagine that we can rid the world, or even ourselves, of evil, contrary to the rhetoric sometimes used by our political leaders. Jesus' parable of the weeds and wheat growing together? That's in every one of us and in everything human. There's no way to just tear all the evil out. So for now we often have to endure the evil, in ourselves and in the world.

But not without struggle. We struggle against evil, struggle against evil in ourselves, struggle against evil in the world. We struggle in the strength of God's Holy Spirit, whom God poured out upon us in Christ and who renews us on the way to the renewing of everything.