

Freedom in Christ: Christ meets us at the crossroads of our core contradictions

Annie Scott, June 23, 2019

Sermon

So ... warning ... these reflections are not PC. Please listen, sift through it. I hope there is something helpful, perhaps just one thing that resonates or refreshes you. I speak using the words and metaphors of a white woman who was raised in the Catholic Tradition, was a part of the Jesus movement of the 1970s, was radicalized in the Christian social justice tradition in the 80s, and more or less settled into the Christian mystical or contemplative tradition.

I want to talk about the inner life, the shadow side of the hidden person behind our eyes today

Richard Rohr, my favorite teacher alive today says when it comes to the spiritual life, I am always my problem.

Here it is again, Mostly from a version called the Message along with the translation according to Annie

So, let's call this Paul's lament:

I know that all God's commands are spiritual but I'm not. Isn't this also your experience?

Yes. I'm full of myself, after all I've spent a long time in ego's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, then I act another. Doing things that really disappoint me. So, if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that obedience is necessary.

But I need something more! For if I know the rules but still can't keep them, and if the power of ego within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't make it happen. I decide not to be selfish, but then I act selfishly anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it's predictable.

The moment I decide to do good, ego trips me up.

I truly delight in the idea of loving my neighbor as myself but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel against what seem like Love's impossible demands, and almost always those parts are in charge. I want to want to love as God loves. But often even this want seems dried up within me. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Do I even care anymore? Isn't that the real Question?

In the actual translations lots of words get slung around: sin, death, mind, flesh, heart, spirit, and will. Like lots of Bible words, these have layered meanings and can be used as judgement bombs like

salvation, repentance, faith, righteousness. Most of us at one time have been confused or harmed by these words. They often trip us up because we try to analyze them as objects (e.g. what is the difference between the will and the flesh?) rather than relate to them as energies we all experience. Is there a single word that names what Paul is describing? I think it may be "Helplessness."

I'll ask you all now to speak out a single word, or no more than a phrase that names the experience of Helplessness to you. Someday perhaps we can share stories of our helplessness.

Shared thoughts....

There is always suffering, a tragedy, minor or grave, involved in the experience of helplessness. It means we've lost control and this feels like dying. For some of us, "The Dark Night of the Soul" names this experience.

I suggest today, in light of Paul's lament in Romans 7, we call it "The Dark Night of the Self," the end of our efforts, our will, our idealism, our fascination with our own thoughts, fixes, and judgements.

The wisdom or mystical traditions call this experience an unspeakable gift without which we cannot begin or continue in the spiritual life. We cannot engineer these moments of insight, of reckoning with the truth of the worthlessness of all we do in the energy of ego. It is crisis and process, big deaths, and as we grow in the spiritual life, innumerable little, almost constant deaths.

The author of the poem called the Dark Night of the Soul, a 15th century mystic named John of the Cross, said it once like this

"Would that man might come at last to see that it is quite impossible to enter into the thicket of the riches and wisdom of God without first entering the thicket of much suffering, in such a way that the soul finds there its consolation and desire. The soul that longs for divine wisdom chooses first, and in truth, to enter the thicket of the cross."

The oldest Christian tombs have inscribed on them not a fish, not a cross, but of a treasured metaphor of helplessness: Jonah in the belly of the whale, about to be spit out alive on a shore he did not choose.

Our Creator meets us IN our doubts, wrestling, contradictions, and poverty, at the collision of opposing forces of our yearning for unity and our individualism. Again, and again, and again.

I want to share a simple phrase with you that has meant so much to me, maybe you have one like it

OUR HELPLESSNESS IS HIS SUFFICIENCY

Now, having said all that, let the beginning of Romans 8 just wash over you. Here it is from the Message:

God went for the jugular when he sent his own son. He didn't deal with the problem as something remote and unimportant. In his Son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity in order to set it right once and for all. The law code, weakened as it always was by fractured human nature, could never have done that. The law always ended up

being used as a Band Aid on sin instead of a deep healing of it. And now what the law code asked for, but we couldn't deliver, is accomplished as we, instead of redoubling our own efforts, simply embrace what the Spirit is doing in us.