

**“Gypsies, Suicide Bombers, and Adolf Hitler”**  
**Romans 5:1-8; Psalm 8**

A number of years ago in one of our worship services a young woman stood up right before I began to read the scripture. In her late thirties, petite, her hair displayed an absence from beauty parlors, her clothes brought images of Good Will or the Salvation Army Thrift Shop. She said she had come seeking help. She needed gas and food. Her voice was calm, with just a hint of desperation. As I assured her I would meet with her after the service, she quickly moved to introduce her children one by one. Clean, but obviously clothed in hand me downs they smiled and glowed as their mother pointed them out. They impressed one as the type of children who were struggling to make the best of difficult circumstances. The entire family looked like people fighting to win a place in the American dream, poor but willing to help themselves.

And the woman’s short spiel touched your hearts. As you left that morning, many of you noted to me your willingness to aid the woman, give money to help her get on her feet. I have no doubt virtually everyone there felt the same way. And, what better place to come for aid than the Church? Here the people of God would respond to the will of God by feeding the hungry, assisting the indigent. What greater opportunity to demonstrate the love of Christ?

But a few weeks later in a sermon I asked how would you feel if I told you the woman was a gypsy? That her bearded husband was waiting for her down at the laundromat? That three weeks later she showed up at Buncombe Street United Methodist with the same shtick? If you were here that Sunday, did you notice how she knew when to stand up in the service? When she could garner the most attention? Before the offering. Did you notice how well this poor, ostensibly uneducated mother articulated in front of 500 people? She spoke plainly, slowly, clearly, without hesitation, but not sounding rehearsed. Did you catch how she told us her name, creating an immediate emotional connection with her? And the coup de grace, remember how I assured her we would meet with her, and when I attempted to move on to reading the scripture, she jumped back in and quickly began introducing her children by name, making certain we established a connection with each of them. And if you talked with them after church, you found well trained children, expert in the art of brightly smiling while telling adults how young they looked. It was a well oiled machine.

Or does it change your feelings to know that when one of our congregation gave her some money for food and gas, informing her a member had donated it, she responded, “Well, I thought there would have been more than this!” Think of the sacrilege. Using the worship of Almighty God as an opportunity to lie and steal, to cheat people by manipulating the Body of Christ. And I asked in the sermon, now, how do you feel about her? Still want to help her? Still have sympathy for her knowing she would cheat you tomorrow if she got the chance? I think on that Sunday most of us thought not. Everything from our moral outrage

to our egos scream out against being taken advantage of, being played for a fool, exploiting our kindness and generosity, our Christian faith. It's one thing to be tricked. It's even worse if they believe they have fooled us. Let's be honest. We don't want to help someone who is consciously exploiting us, attempting to use us. To do so goes against all our emotions and intellect.

But coming to the aid of a woman like this is exactly what Jesus did. "For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person — though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proved his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us."

There is a paradox in the Christian faith. On the one hand, we proclaim each and every person a child of God. Every one of us has value. We grasp onto the promise that God loves us, knows the number of hairs on our heads, intimately cares about each of us.

On the other hand, we note that each and every one of us is a sinner, sinful to the core. Without God we are nothing more than molecules of ego and selfishness. Only by a radical, divine transformation can we be lifted from the mud and mire of sin and degradation. And we possess no hope of doing this by ourselves. Only the love of God can work such a miracle.

Jewish tradition relates the story of a rabbi who sought to understand his place in the universe. To keep a balance between thinking too highly or too lowly of himself, he had two notes, one in each of his two pants pockets. One note read: "For me the world was created." The other note read: "I am nothing more than dust and ashes." It is this line the Christian struggles to walk.

But, I think it is fair to say that human beings, through all human history right up to today, have strongly leaned toward emphasizing the image of God within us rather than our tendency toward sin. Just go to any bookstore and peruse the shelves. Hundreds of books on how to feel better about ourselves, how to instill confidence in our children, how to accept our own selfworth, how to become more assertive in demanding our rightful place in the world. And, these are not bad, or even wrong, concepts within a certain strata of perspective. Some people need, and should, see themselves in a more positive light.

But the margin separating viewing oneself of value because we are a child of God versus seeing myself as deserving of life's prosperity is a very thin line. The Bible, and history, teach us humanity continuously falls prey to viewing ourselves more positively than we really are.

For instance, Newsweek magazine contained an informative article on evil. Researchers are now asking the question: what makes a person evil? How does one become an Adolf Hitler? And the findings are interesting and scary. Robert I. Simon, director of the program in Psychiatry and Law at Georgetown University School of Medicine says, "The capacity for evil is a human universal. There is a continuum of evil, of course, ranging from 'trivial evils' like cutting someone off

in traffic, to greater evils like acts of prejudice, to massive evils like those perpetrated by serial killers. But within all of us are the roots of evil.”

Of course, this statement carries no surprise for people of faith. The story of Adam and Eve is the parable of the evil possibilities residing within each one of us. The Bible hammers home our innate sinful tendency. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “to do the things I would not do.” And the Bible does this because without this fundamental recognition of our own sinfulness, our capacity to do bad things, we naturally begin to believe we are just a little better, a little smarter, a little more worthy than others.

For instance, have you ever noticed how having money can make you just a little more assertive, enables us to think we are just a little smarter, more astute than those with less?

When we begin to see ourselves as less prone to sin, then we view our opinions, our decisions, our desires, of more value, more worthy. We would *never* say we conceive ourselves as better than others, but our thoughts and actions do seem a little more cogent, more pure, more helpful. But, it is the knowledge and understanding of our sinfulness that tempers an exalted view of our thoughts and actions. It is a realization of our capacity for evil that enables us to look with sympathy and understanding on the struggles of others.

Let’s return to the gypsy lady. How disgusting to consciously come into a worship service and intentionally manipulate religious emotions in an attempt to swindle people out of money. But is it any worse than making 100 or \$200,000 a year and giving God back 2, 3 or 4 thousand dollars, or making \$250,000 – \$500,000 a year and giving God 10, 15, or \$20,000? Is her using us any worse than the prejudice that causes us to treat store clerks, waiters, those of another color as inferiors? Jesus constantly warned us about focusing on the splinters in our neighbor’s eyes while ignoring the log in our own. We will not thwart the sin within us until we are willing to see it acknowledge it.

A room full of pregnant women and their husbands were attending a Lamaze class. The instructor was teaching women to breathe properly, along with informing the men how to give necessary assurances at each stage. Then the teacher announced, “Ladies, exercise is good for you. Walking is especially beneficial. And gentlemen, it wouldn’t hurt you to take the time to go walking with your wife!” With this admonition, the room got really quiet. Finally, a man in middle of the group raised his hand. “Yes!” responded the teacher. “Is it all right,” he asked, “if when we walk together she also carries a golf bag?”

It is so easy to overlook the selfish nature of our desires and actions, to convince ourselves what benefits us is doing something good for others.

We are sinful — every single one of us. And the only way we conquer this evil is through the love and forgiveness of God. “But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”

What is called the atonement, how Christ's death produces forgiveness for us, remains a mystery we struggle to explain. In this section, even Paul stumbles around looking for a way to capture a divine act with mortal words. But what we can understand is the radical love one must possess to die for another person. Now, because we so easily and glibly proclaim, "Christ died for us," we have become used to, accepting, comfortable with the idea of God acting benevolently on our behalf. Consequently, we overlook the radical nature of Christ's death. But when we think about it, we recognize how inexplicable, inconceivable it was.

Seeking to discover a method by which to measure it, Paul notes there can be a certain logic in dying for a just or righteous person, or even a good one, but who would die for a sinful person — for the gypsy lady, or Attila the Hun, or Adolf Hitler, or a suicide bomber, or you and me?

Jesus. Paul describes us as weak, ungodly sinners, and yet Christ died for us. God showed his radical love for us in that he was willing to let Jesus die.

For whom would you die? Your children, maybe your parents. But who else? What other person in the whole world would you step forward and say, "Kill me instead of him?" And yet, Jesus did exactly that. He didn't offer himself for only the just or the good, but for each and every human being, because each and everyone of us is sinful and can only transform our lives by the radical love God offers.

Paul begins by delineating the pervasive nature of our sin, our bent toward ego, selfishness, and greed. Because only by realizing this sinfulness can we grasp the radical nature of Christ's death for us, the love inherent in that act. And only then can we understand our immense need for the transforming love found in Jesus Christ.

Dorothy Day, who was a well known Roman Catholic activist for the poor, in her book, On Pilgrimage, wrote about coming back from visiting in the country to their center in New York City where they worked with alcoholics, drug addicts, the poor and down trodden. She says:

It is always a terrible thing to come back to Mott Street. Tom come back in a driving rain, to men crouched on the stairs, huddled in doorways, without overcoats because they sold them perhaps the week before when it was warm, to satisfy hunger or thirst — who knows? Those without love would say, "It serves them right, drinking up their clothes."

"God helps us," she writes, "if we got just what we deserved."

Because of Christ's death, you and I don't get what we deserve. Rather, we receive the love and forgiveness of a gracious, benevolent, and loving heavenly Father.

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How many of us would die for these people? None of us is likely the honest answer. And the Apostle Paul agrees. And that knowledge puts in perspective the radical nature of God's love. It is a love encompassing all sinners, each and everyone of us — from gypsies to suicide bombers to Adolf Hitler. It reminds us the Church is nothing more than all of us sinners banding together grasping for this divine love. It tells us why the Church can never be the exclusivistic province of the self-appointed righteous. Everyone, *everyone* is welcome in the community of faith because not a one of us deserves what we receive here.

This morning, in the stillness of our hearts let us admit the sin and evil that so attracts us. Then, let us seek the radical love found in Jesus Christ, realizing that through him our lives can and will be transformed.

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