

Oh God

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate. (Romans 7)

I admit I am powerless and responsible ...and powerless and responsible and powerless and responsible. Help me.

*

I've got to admit, I didn't immediately take to Paul. What was all this parsing of sin and damning of the flesh and outlining our flaws and bewailing his existence....Where was my friend, my beloved, my liberator my Jesus!

Paul in comparison seemed sort of obsessive compulsive...like me, on a bad day. He was hard to get close to. Maybe because he was too busy wagging his finger and excoriating his faults and correcting everyone's else's behavior and washing and washing and washing his hands.

Oh Paul! Why this inveighing against the flesh?

Earlier in the passage, I was on the edge of being reconverted, beginning to grasp something so important, it could change my life! when I get derailed (again!) by your language

“*I know nothing good dwells within me, that is...in my flesh!*”

Paul can turn so quickly for me, in my 2020 context, from a saint bearing the truth, into a cackling nun, slapping at me with a ruler in a dim day school for staring out a window or dreaming about a boy or...

But wait...is that what Paul and by extension Christianity really means by the sin of the flesh ?

In the Biblical Greek, what we might think of as our bodily-ness is translated two different ways: sometimes as *sarx* and sometimes as *soma*. Here, Paul uses the word *sarx* for flesh. It comes from another Greek word which means *to draw off*, as in *to draw off the bones*. This is flesh which can be stripped off bones, drained of blood, robbed of its wholeness and left to rot in the sun, something one probably could see a lot of in 1st century Palestine

This is not the vision of the body that the Song of Songs extols that Kathy read so beautifully this morning and that my son Sam will sing later, in an arrangement by Healey Willan. This body is divinely given and divinely inspired, every hair on the head known and loved and named *and touched*. One particular and particularly organized, God-given wholeness: a *soma*, a body meant for figs.

Over this wholeness, even the powers of death or

another human being's violence or betrayal have no dominion.
Arise my love, my fair one and come away....

If you have had a good experience of love on this earth or even had it for one season and then had it taken away by human frailty or sin or death, or have had to find it alone in your own body and soul, you *know* this is something good meant by God for human beings.

Sometimes, I want to remind Paul to read the Song of Songs, out loud and with feeling! Or more practically, given that he is no longer available, remind myself that what I *think* he means, when i read him in 2020, is not *most radically and fundamentally* what he means. He is not telling me that I am a bad bad bad bad girl. Even though sometimes, it feels like it He is offering me.... Freedom.

Listen to this: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right but I can not do it!*

Oh lord, I have free will. But I am still in chains

This verse meant a lot to our forefather ST Augustine in 400 AD. It foreshadows Freud's powerful work on the unconscious in the 1920's. And now in 2020, it sure as heck speaks to me.

I would guess a lot of us have had Paul's experience, of not understanding our own actions, of finding that, in spite of our

best intentions, *it is not the good we want but the evil that we do not want, that is what we do!*

Painfully for me, it is in my parenting where this comes to mind, perhaps because nothing before has ever mattered so much. If I blew it before I had kids...ahh so what...I'm an individual. It only hurt myself! But now? *I am responsible and powerless and responsible and powerless. Help me lord.* Sometimes, in spite of my best intentions, my commitment to self reflection, my efforts at self improvement, my *years* in therapy, sometimes ...I do the very thing I hate.

People in Alcoholics Anonymous seem to have a leg up here. Perhaps because admitting they are powerless over alcohol and that their lives have become unmanageable is AA's first step. But why just alcohol? Admitting that *we are powerless* and that our lives are in some sense *fundamentally unmanageable is* the first step.

The truth that Paul sees, that the Christianity that I practice is willing **to admit** is that our lives *are* unmanageable, first of all because merely managing them piecemeal: like flesh stripped off the bone and broken up into discrete bits, like pieces of bloodless sarx is *not the best we can hope for*. And second of all because sometimes the very act of trying to manage ourselves and our lives, and other people and other people's lives makes everything worse.

*What Paul realizes is that sin is...systematic. It is not doing what we want when we know it is wrong. Calling someone a name, say because it makes us feel powerful. That's just bad behavior. The sin Paul is talking about is the evil that flourishes EVEN in our best and most well-intentioned actions. As professor Ted Smith writes "it flourishes even in our work **for goods** like peace, justice, equality, hospitality, the welfare of vulnerable people...", the Black Lives Matter movement, lower taxes for all, gun reform, gun rights, a woman's right to choose, abortion restrictions. Sin flourishes even in our proclamation of the Gospel, for Pete's sake, as we have all seen recently.*

This is why we aren't very good at creating utopias and why older people sometimes shake their head at younger people who walk off into the woods to make a more perfect world, even as we *hope to God* that they will. We are caught in webs of power dynamics that we did not create, and that we can't see clearly, and that feeling guilty about will not really help. In fact, it may make the situation worse. For all I know sin might flourish in my well-intentioned deed from just yesterday: turning a blind eye, to the people spending the night on the porch of our church. Even that may have death dealing ends.

Sin flourishes even here, in the place I stand : chin up, eyes proud. Sin flourishes even in the place where *I know* that I am right

Oh man. We are screwed!

The Place Where We Are Right

by Yehuda Amichai

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.

But oh sweet Jesus, there is hope in that whisper. Christianity asks us raise our hands over these hard-working, well intentioned minds of ours at least once a week and ask for help:

Ask for better food and better drink, because like Paul, like AA, we too have come to believe that only a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity and make us whole.

And the most amazing thing is, the greatest mystery of all, which I swear to God I don't understand, is that it can.

When I receive communion, I feel that it is really *my body* that is given back to me, in all its goodness, restored to right relationship w God (a phrase I hear frequently but that I don't really understand: who stands where and how do the hors d'oeuvres get passed?) or at the very least myself, with all my warring members: my head, my heart, my guts, my sex, my dreams, my fears. Restored from sarx to soma: a body made for dancing when the flute plays and for mourning when the time comes: A body made for figs.

But it is not because I have been good; or figured something out:our managed my life correctly; or my children's lives or said mea culpa in just the right way. No. It's just because, by the grace of God and the miracle of chance, I am somehow *meant to be*.

Oh God, your power, could crush me. Or vanish. I am a tiny speck in the universe who can't change the planets in the courses or single handedly undo racism or perfectly understand the pros and cons of late stage capitalism or Soviet vs European socialism or *even my relationship w my mother*.

I can't even remember to modulate my voice when speaking with my children.

And yet you offer freedom, that I can not create for myself, not even on the 4th of July. My life recentered in what I can not perfectly understand but that makes me whole. For your yoke is easy and your burden is light

Amen