

Theology for Thinking People: The Human Condition
Philippians 2:6-11

One of my favorite novels last year was called *The Index of Self-Destructive Acts*, by Christopher Beha. The primary characters in the story are a family in New York City. Each of them is, in their own way, a lost soul. Frank Doyle is a famous newspaper columnist who tanked his career in a single moment, by making a racist joke during a radio interview. He lost his job for that stupid mistake, thinking something was funny that was not. And now he sits at home in his office pretending to write a book, actually watching video of baseball highlights over and over again. His wife Kit is a successful financial analyst who built a firm and a fortune that evaporated in the financial crisis of 2008. Now she runs around trying to breathe air into something that has fully deflated. Their daughter Margo has dropped out of graduate school because she is self-destructing. She can't quite bring herself to admit, even to herself, that she doesn't want to teach poetry; she wants to write it. Their son Eddie has returned from military service in Iraq, and now he cannot find his place anywhere in the world.

Every character in this book is lost in their own way. In some moments they maintain the appearance of success, even occasional happiness, but each of them is vaguely conscious that they're not living the life they were made for. They have impulses to do good, and they behave badly for no good reason. They are hungry, and they can't quite find the thing that will satisfy them.

Each of them is an illustration of what Paul says about. Himself in his New Testament letter to the Romans.

I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will [myself to follow God's law], but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me. It gets the better of me every time.

Romans 7:17-20 (The Message)

Or the story the 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich told about Adam, whose name means 'every man'. He was sent out into the world on an extremely important mission from God; only along the way to do what he was sent to do, he falls into a ditch and cannot get out. He misses his divine appointment.

You are not alone. Every life feels like it is missing its divine appointment in some way.

A magazine I read regularly, called *The Christian Century*, not too long ago published an issue whose first entry was an editorial about Americans' grandiose delusions about ourselves, the ways our financial security and professional competence, our human ingenuity, can deceive us into thinking of ourselves as omnipotent—endlessly powerful. 'Some days, we ought to pity God for having to try to wrestle any humility at all out of us,' this piece said.¹ True enough. And then, just a few pages later, in the very same issue, there was another essay that suggested that the true

source of our human problems, our deepest reluctance to trust God, is that we have trouble believing humans are worthy of God's love. We simply can't make that leap of faith into imagining that the unreliable creatures we see in the mirror and the strange ones we meet on the street are worthy of God's attention. Humility is good, this writer said, but our dark judgment, of ourselves and one another, can poison the seeds of faith.ⁱⁱ

How can we be both—holding too high an opinion of human power and human achievement, and unable to imagine ourselves worthy of divine attention—at the same time? And yet it is true. We are both. We are 'only human' *and* we are made in the image of God. We disappoint regularly *and* we have the capacity to be so much more than a mess of wrecked intentions. This is the truth that our story captures and wrestles with, from beginning to end—Christian theology, all our understandings about who God is and God's expectations of us.

The good news in the Bible is not life-saving—it's not even helpful—without acknowledging this truth, that we humans are a mixed bag. Our progressive Christianity has almost completely stopped talking about sin, mostly in reaction to another Christianity talking too much about it. We figured out that no one wants to be in relationship with a God who mentions first all the things that are wrong with you, even if that list is followed by 'but I still love you.'

But this story is also not 'No judgment. It's all good.' It's not all good. If we ever thought that, the last two years have disabused us of that illusion. It's not only virus running free through the streets that plagues us; it's our unwillingness to care for one another fully, to see that a poor kid in the slums of Soweto or a hospital janitor from East San Jose has a life just as worthy of protection as our own. In the last couple of years we've been given another chance to see the truth: that it is dangerous to be black in America. We have lived with the consequences of the false belief that freedom means that I can do anything that's good for *me*; that other people can just vote for something different if they want to protect themselves.

Our inability, and sometimes our refusal, to live full, flourishing, connected and care-full lives is what Christian theology has named 'sin'. Sometimes that word gets shrunk down into something too small: a list of infractions that we think deserve guilt and punishment. But really, sin is a much bigger idea than that. I want to invite you today to think of sin differently than perhaps you have before.

Think of sin as all the things that cause suffering: anything that separates us from the good life God hopes for us, all those things that distance and alienate us from one another. It's not only killing someone; it's self-deception and pride. Sometimes sin involves fault, but sometimes it is fault-less. It's not only our conscious bad choices; it's sickness, oppression, homelessness. It's loneliness, shame, incurable sadness—all the ways we are dissatisfied with our lives. It's what Jesus knew in the last moments of his life. Jesus died *in sin*, so in pain that the only words he could find for his aloneness were the Psalmist's. 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Sin is not misbehavior; it's a chronic condition, a 'disease of the soul'. Sin is the un-wholeness that lives inside each of us and all of us collectively. Right alongside the possibility of flourishing, our immense capacity to love each other well, this too is the reality of being human.

If we can look at our story through that different lens, I think we will see that God's response to this human condition isn't judgment; it's compassion. God is far less shocked than we are that everything does not go well for us at all times. When Adam and Eve ate from the tree whose fruit was poison to them and they fled the garden in shame, God came looking for them. 'Where are you?' were God's first words. 'I miss our walks.' When God described to them what human life out in the real world would look like, that it would include pain as well as joy, work and pleasure both, the storytellers called that punishment...because it *feels* like punishment. Sometimes being human *feels* punishing. Life can taste confusingly, disappointingly, bitter.

This is the human condition God has always stretched far to come and meet us in. In the God-on-earth life we call Jesus, God was saying, 'I'm in it with you.'

Our story says that when we were too sick or stubborn or beaten down or self-centered or ashamed to make a move, God made himself into a bridge, came all the way to us. All the way into death, the ultimate fear behind every other fear. The Christian story has a crucifixion right at the center of it to show us just how far God is willing to lean in.

*Jesus emptied himself,
took the form of a slave, a being entirely without power,
by becoming like human beings.
When he found himself in the form of a human,
he humbled himself even more, becoming obedient to the point of death,
even death on a cross.*

Philippians 2:6-11 (paraphrased)

That's the story. *That's* the story that first century Christians told so often, that it became a song they sang to one another. They sang it to remind themselves of who Jesus was, why he came, what his death meant. It wasn't until centuries later that some theologian tried to merge Christianity and capitalism by explaining the crucifixion as a financial transaction, calling the human condition a debt that Jesus had to make good on for us.

That's the story we were told. It's the story Christianity has told for a long time—that Jesus died to appease an angry God who could not countenance the waywardness of humanity gone wrong. I'm asking you today to hold that story up next to everything else you believe, all you know and have seen for yourself about who God is. Does that story make sense to you?

Christ's death isn't a story about the resolution of a cosmic criminal prosecution. It's the climax of a love story.

It is true: Jesus died to save us from our sin. But not from the retribution of a God who already loved us. Jesus died to save us from all the ways human life falls short of what it might be: cut off from one another, distanced from the flourishing life God always hoped we might live. Jesus died to save us from ourselves—all the ways we are killing ourselves and one another, all the ways the presence of God among us gets extinguished. He came, he lived, he died, to show us that it is possible to live gracefully in a world that holds disappointment and glory both, health and sickness, conflict and moments of exquisite connection. Life and death.

We need the story of the crucifixion. It holds God's ultimate promise, to do whatever it takes to come and find us--no matter how lost we get, how separated from the rest of our human flock, how unrecognizable even to ourselves. Nothing, nothing can separate you from God's love, it says. Not the worst thing you can imagine. Not the next thing after that.

And that kind of love—it can save your life.

ⁱ Peter W. Marty in *The Christian Century*, December 15, 2021 p.3

ⁱⁱ *Living the Word*, *The Christian Century*, December 15, 2021 p.20