



“Anguish, Art and Grace”

A Sermon Based on Philippians 3:17-4:1
Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, Urbana
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There are many experiences in our lives that cause great anguish. One of those experiences is having an offer of help go unaccepted or unwanted. At some point in our lives we all know someone, maybe a family member, who is in distress or danger. And we know that we can help. We have some idea of what to do. But when we try to help, we are refused, rebuffed, maybe even rebuked or cut off. And we are left to watch helplessly as the distress or danger overtakes the one who we wanted to help.

There is no pain like that caused by avoidable suffering which comes nonetheless because our help was not wanted. That kind of pain is what moves Norman Maclean’s story *A River Runs Through It*. It is a beautiful story of two brothers, sons of a Presbyterian minister, who were part of a family where “there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.” The brothers were told by their father about “...Christ’s disciples being fishermen, and we were left to assume, as my brother and I did, that all first-class fishermen on the Sea of Galilee were fly fishermen and that John, the favorite, was a dry-fly fisherman.”

“My father,” Maclean writes, “was very sure about certain matters pertaining to the universe. To him all good things—trout as well as eternal salvation--come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy. So my brother and I learned to cast Presbyterian-style, on a metronome.”

In the course of the story, we are presented with some of that art and grace as they knew it fishing on the rivers of western Montana. We also see the

difficulty, we see that art does not come easy, and that sometimes that difficulty hurts. Maclean, thoroughly versed in Calvinism, wonderfully and wrenchingly reveals the scandal that some indeed seem to be chosen, or elect, and that some seem to go unchosen. And nothing can be done about it.

Maclean tells us early that there will be trouble. He writes, "Since one of the earliest things brothers try to find out is how they differ from each other, one of the things I remember longest about Paul is this business about his liking to bet. He would go to the county fairs to pretend that he was betting on horses, like the men, except that no betting booths would take his bets because they were too small and he was too young. When his bets were refused, he would say... 'I'd like that get [him] on the Blackfoot [River] for a day, with a bet on the side.' By the time he was in his early twenties he was in the big stud poker games."

"We had to be very careful in dealing with each other. I often thought of him as a boy, but I could never treat him that way. He was never 'my kid brother.' He was master of an art [fly fishing]. He did not want any big brother advice or money or help, and, in the end, I could not help him."

That end he writes about is his brother's death. Paul was found, beaten to death by the butt of a revolver, apparently over his unpaid gambling debts. Norman and his father were left to struggle to understand.

They have a conversation near the end of the story. "After a long time [my father] came with something he must have wanted to ask from the first. 'Do you think it was just a stick-up and foolishly he tried to fight his way out? You know what I mean--that it wasn't connected with anything in his past?'

'The police don't know,' I said.

'But do you?' he asked, and I felt the implication.

'I've said I've told you all I know. If you push me far enough, all I really know is that he was a fine fisherman.'

'You know more than that,' my father said. 'He was beautiful.'

Then he asked, 'After you have finished your true stories, the stories you like to tell, why don't you make up a story and the people to go with it? Only then

will you understand what happened and why.' It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us."

II

Jesus knew this anguish. At the very beginning, John's Gospel tells us, "He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not." And we read today how he cried out over Jerusalem, "How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!"

Jesus knew this kind of anguish. He came to save, but he was rejected by so many. What could he do? Here near the end of his ministry, he faced again the dilemma that he faced in the wilderness after his baptism. How could he get people to listen to him? Would he use force, or manipulation?

No. He refused that option in the second temptation. He refused it again, when he and the disciples were traveling toward Jerusalem. On the way, they passed through Samaria. He sent messengers ahead of him to prepare the way, but the Samaritans, who despised the Jews, refused to extend hospitality to Jesus and the disciples, because they knew they were on their way to Jerusalem.

Seeing this, James and John asked Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?" Sternly, Jesus rebuked them. Though he would be killed by his opposition, he would not kill.

That was the world's way. It was the way of the fox, the way of kings and emperors, to eliminate their adversaries, to silence the opposition. It was not the way of the hen, who protects her young, even though by doing so, she places herself at risk. That would be how Jesus saves those that are his, by placing himself in danger, by risking death. Jesus would save by being faithful to God's way.

That is Paul's message to the Philippians. "Join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us." We will help bring salvation by being faithful, by following Christ's example. Paul is not suggesting that we be faithful to him. In chapter 2, we find the beautiful hymn in which Paul describes

the example of Jesus who “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,...”

He then lifts up Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples. Lastly, he suggests himself as an example. But all of their examples are rooted in Christ Jesus. We will help, we will play our part in bringing in salvation, by following the example of our Lord.

Now, that is difficult in our culture, in our time. We are conditioned to expect quick results and snappy service. We may feel personally affronted when we have to wait. And we may become angry if we are refused. It is little wonder, then, that we would fall back on force, in its many manifestations, to insure we get our way. Even in matters of faith, we confuse the right to be heard, with a right to be heeded. The result is that too many times in church history, we have made ourselves enemies of the cross of Christ. (Phil. 3:18)

If Jesus was rejected by those to whom he spoke, how can we not expect that some will not listen to us? The question is, what then? Will we resort to force or manipulation?

Many times, people, under the guise of faith, have done so. We know that the Puritans left England because they were weary of persecution. Once in New England, the puritans exercised power. Their behavior in the new world is particularly ironic. For they had known persecution. But rather than opposing persecution, they simply went somewhere else, a place where they would have the power. a place where they would persecute.

In the new world, they mirrored the Church of England. Roger Williams they banished to the wilderness for preaching that church and state should be separate, and for suggesting that the Indians should be paid for their land. So they said, “Let him die among his Indian friends.” Instead, Williams would help gain the charter for the founding of the colony of Rhode Island in 1663, and it would become a haven of the freedoms that we now take for granted.

Wanting the freedom to practice their faith as they were led by God to practice it, the puritans made themselves the enemies of the cross of Christ

because they denied that freedom to everyone else, once they gained control of the wheels of power. It is one thing to want freedom for yourself. It is another entirely to want that same freedom for everyone. At our best, we do not confuse the right to be heard, with the right to be heeded.

III

If we follow the example of Christ Jesus, coercion is never an option for us. If we would please him, then we must be faithful as he was faithful. His way is the way of the cross. It is the way of all who are rooted in the colony of heaven that Paul wrote about. As one writer describes it, "A colony is a beachhead, an island of one kingdom in the midst of another." And "it exists because, on their own, the individuals of the colony could never survive in the hostile environment of an alien empire."

In the colony, we are formed for life in our true home. We are reminded that one allegiance is primary. And we are fortified against seductions and temptations of any other place which would want us to make our home there.

We need that fortification. For we have this tendency to baptize our preconceptions and enshrine our fears in doctrine. We are easily led to make the fox's way our way.

So for us, Christ's way of the cross can be the only way. Sometimes, as for him, it is the way of anguish. It is a way of vulnerability. But it is also the way of love. Thanks be to God that Christ has pioneered the way for us. Amen.