

Making Pancake Batter for the Glory of God

Romans 7: 15-25a

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First Federated Church

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(SERMON NOTES)

Six-year-old Brandon decided one Saturday morning to fix his parents pancakes. He found a big bowl and spoon, pulled a chair to the counter, opened the cupboard and pulled out the heavy flour canister, spilling it on the floor.

He scooped some of the flour into the bowl with his hands, mixed in most of a cup of milk and added some sugar, leaving a floury trail on the floor which by now had a few tracks left by his kitten.

Brandon was covered with flour and getting frustrated. He wanted this to be something very good for Mom and Dad, but it was getting very bad.

He didn't know what to do next, whether to put it all into the oven or on the stove and he didn't know how the stove worked! Suddenly he saw his kitten licking from the bowl of mix and reached to push her away, knocking the egg carton to the floor. Frantically he tried to clean up this monumental mess but slipped on the eggs, getting his pajamas white and sticky.

And just then he saw Dad standing at the door. Big crocodile tears welled up in Brandon's eyes. All he'd wanted to do was something good, but he'd made a terrible mess.

That's the human dilemma. All little Brandon wanted to do was to do something good, but he ended up making a mess of things. Haven't we all had that experience more often than we would like to admit? We want to do is something good, something kind, something that touches the life of another human being, something that makes this world a better place, but more often than not we make a mess of things. It is kind of like the children's book *Little Miss Helpful*.

When my daughters were young I loved to read to them Roger Hargreaves "Little Miss" series of children's books; *Little Miss Bossy*, *Little Miss Naughtery*, *Little Miss Neat* and my favorite, *Little Miss Helpful*. I don't know how familiar you are with the characters but the "Little Misses" are essentially colored ball shaped figures with arms and legs.

"Little Miss Helpful was one of those people who loves to help other people, but ends up helping nobody." For instance, there was this time when one of Mr. Tall's shoelaces came undone. This was terribly tragic for Mr. Tall because he had extremely long legs and no knees so he could not bend over to tie his own shoelaces. When Little Miss Helpful saw that Mr. Tall's shoelace were untied she cried out, "Let me help!" as she rushed up to him. She tied Mr. Tall's shoelaces but unfortunately she tied them *together!* So when Mr. Tall took his first step, down he went. Bang! "Ouch!" cried Mr. Tall rubbing his head.

"Let me help," cried Little Miss Helpful as she rushed off to get some bandages. She rushed back to Mr. Tall and quickly put all of the bandages on him—even over his mouth.

“Mmmmmmmmmmm, mmmmmmm, mmmm!” cried Mr. Tall. He was trying to say, “Take them off!” but Little Miss Helpful couldn’t understand him so she ripped the bandages off of his mouth! “Owwww,” he cried. “That hurt!”

“Let me help,” cried Little Miss Helpful.

“Nooooooo!” he cried. “Go away!”

Now you know about people like Little Miss Helpful who want help but who help nobody!

Robert Louis Stevenson was once asked where he found the model for the principal character in his horror novel *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. If you are unfamiliar with the story, it is about a doctor who drinks a potion that he concocted that turns him into a self-centered selfish monster named “Mr. Hyde.” The more he drinks the potion, the harder it becomes for him to banish Mr. Hyde from his life.

In response to the question about the story’s main character Stevenson replied, “I found it in my nature.” Robert Louis Stevenson *was* the good Dr. Jekyll *and* the selfish Mr. Hyde.

I love today’s Scripture lesson. It speaks to my spirit. It describes me! And, I suspect, if you are honest, it describes you, too. In the passage the apostle Paul is struggling with what I call our “fallen human condition.”

Even when we try to do the right thing, there is a good chance that we will mess up. That is one of the reasons why I often end prayers with the words, “Lord, if we have done anything in error, take even those broken threads and weave them into the tapestry of Your Kingdom.”

This is not some sort of false humility. It is an acknowledgement of reality.

Elton Trueblood once called Lincoln America’s best theologian. Raised on the frontier of America under conditions that are largely unimaginable to us, throughout his life Lincoln wrestled with trying—making some sense out of—the tragic deaths of a beloved sister, his mother, his “first true love”, two sons and the mounting toll from the American Civil War. He struggled with these deaths and other hardships in his life by embracing something called “the doctrine of necessity, ” a widely unpopular theology in his time and today. The doctrine of necessity holds that we cannot understand the ways of God no matter how hard we try. We try to do the right thing but we can never be totally sure that we *are* doing the right thing. Thus, people on both sides of the American Civil War prayed to God but were not sure that they were praying rightly.

Lincoln was very fond of story that made the Washington rounds during his presidency. Two Quaker ladies were talking and one of them said to the other. “I think Jefferson (Davis) will succeed because he is a praying man.” “But so is Abraham (Lincoln)” the other replied. “Yes,” the first woman said, “but the Lord will think that Abraham is joking.”

Lincoln never claimed to control events. He believed that he was plainly controlled by the events of the Civil War. During his second inaugural address, which interestingly has been called America's finest sermon, he said,

“Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. ... Each looked for an easier triumph, ...

“Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes (God's) aid against the other. ... The prayers of both could not be answered. ...

“The Almighty has His own purposes. ...

“If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses ... (that God) now wills to remove, and that (God) gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe ...?

“Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Even when we try to do the right thing, the good thing, we cannot be sure that we are doing either. Listen again to what the apostle Paul wrote.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do! ... Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death?

In other words, “Who will save me from myself!”

We *are* Little Miss Helpful.

We *are* little Brandon standing in the middle of Life's kitchen in the midst of a mess of pancake batter that *we* created.

When Brandon saw his father standing in the doorway he was sure that he was going to be scolded or even spanked. But his father just stood there, watching him. Then, walking through the mess, he picked up his frightened, crying son and hugged him, getting his own pajamas white and sticky in the process. Then his dad did something totally unexpected. Holding Brandon in his arms he walked over to the kitchen and together the two of them made a batch of pancakes.

Who will save me from this body of death? Paul asked. *Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God.*

Therein lies the good news.

How do we respond to this gospel message, this “good news?” Consider the words of Mother Teresa that were inscribed on the wall of an orphanage in Calcutta.

People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered;
 Forgive them anyway.
 If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;
 Be kind anyway.
 If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies;
 Succeed anyway.
 If you are honest and frank people, people may cheat you;
 Be honest and frank anyway.
 What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;
 Build anyway.
 If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous;
 Be happy anyway.
 The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;
 Do good anyway.
 Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;
 Give the world the best you’ve got anyway.
 You see, in the final analysis it is between you and God.
 It was never between you and them anyway.

In however many days you have left, mix up some pancake batter for the glory of God!

CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

Our charge and benediction comes from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians.

Brothers and sisters, never tire of doing good.

Now may the Lord of peace give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with you all.

Amen.