

“THOROUGHLY CONFUSED@
ROMANS 7: 15-25a

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University Church of Chicago
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Thanks to the musical *Les Miserables*, many Americans now know the story line of Victor Hugo's famous novel. The hero is a French peasant named Jean Valjean. As a young man, he had stolen a loaf of bread to feed the children of his sister. For this humanitarian theft he spent five years in prison. He escaped but was recaptured and then spent nineteen years on prison ships. When finally released, he was totally embittered and raged against a system that had treated him so badly.

As with most ex-convicts, he found that wherever he went people shunned him and the police watched his every movement. He would come to a town and look for lodgings but when the word got around that he was a criminal, nobody was willing to have any contact with him. Eventually he came to a house where he was taken in. The person who accepted him and offered him kindness was the bishop of that diocese. But Jean's alienation was so deep that he absconded with the bishop's prized silver candlesticks. The police, however, had been watching Jean, so they seized him and took him back to the bishop's house with his loot.

Most people would probably think that the bishop had been more than benevolent already by taking in an ex-convict and entrusting so much to him. He had given him food and lodging when everybody else in town had rejected Jean. But the bishop gives us new insight into the meaning of grace. He tells the police that they have made a terrible mistake. He was, he tells them, *giving* the silver to Jean Valjean so that he can make a new start. The police are astonished but they release their prisoner.

After the police leave, the bishop says to Jean, “Just remember that I have given you this so that you may become an honest man.” And Jean does in fact undergo a conversion experience. He becomes a hard-working and highly responsible person, eventually being elected mayor of the city where he has settled. That's not the end of the story by any means; Victor Hugo is too good a novelist to leave the tale there. But let's come back to that. First, let's look at what happened in Jean's encounter with the bishop.

Like every one of us, Jean Valjean was a person in whom there was a mixture of good and bad. When we meet him, the bad is stronger than the good, although you would have to say that the bad had derived much of its power from the harsh treatment Jean had received from society. He is a man cut off from God and from others but he is powerless to break free of his alienation and isolation.

We know that we are free agents who make choices -some constructive and life-directing, others confused and destructive. We know that we bear at least some responsibility for our sins and failures, but we don't seem to break free of them and become what deep in our consciousness we want to become. The disabling factor of sin prevents us. We need help; we need help from something beyond ourselves. We need the power to change.

When Paul writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," he is speaking for you and me. This is the statement of a person who is a mature Christian. It is a statement of the agonized struggle we all experience—no matter where we are on our faith pilgrimage. If I am already a Christian, why do I continue to sin? Does not being a Christian mean that I should be able to do what I know is right and avoid doing what I know is wrong?

Robert Burns went up to his mother's little church in the north of Scotland, and he listened dutifully to the long-winded sermon filled with oughts and shoulds. After worship, as he and his mother ate lunch, Burns blurted out, "That preacher needs to tell his people, 'This is what you must do. Go and do it!'"

To which Burns's wise Mom replied, "Aye, Bobby, and would you tell them how?"

We need grace, and grace is in the first place a gift that we must receive if we are to overcome our weakness and negligence, if we are going to stop making bad choices that spoil our lives. The gift of grace comes ultimately from God; it is indeed God giving God's self, although God often does this through an identifiable human agent.

When I was pastor of Faith Methodist Church in Waukegan, the local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous called one day to say that they had a "mugwump" who wanted to talk to a pastor. Would I spend some time with him? (A "mugwump" in AA parlance is someone who has her/his mug in AA and his/her wump on a bar stool. That is, the person has not been able to move beyond steps two or three in the program.

I watched the man literally stagger up the long sidewalk leading to the church entrance. Then I welcomed him into my tiny office, no bigger than a closet. He sat across the desk from me, and told me his story of trying to quit drinking, broken marriages, lost jobs, alienation, depression—all the stories we hear in AA over and over again.

I had been reading this passage from Romans that morning, so when he finished his story, I said, "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..."

The man looked up, his face brightened, and he almost shouted, “I don’t know who wrote that. But he had to be an alcoholic!”

Well, probably not. Nevertheless, Paul speaks a truth we all know, doesn’t he? We are thoroughly confused about both our motives and our actions. And we are confused about the consequences of our actions and how they may or may not relate to God’s will.

I do not pretend to know how God acts, but I do know that it is supremely Jesus Christ who mediates to us the grace of God. “Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ,” the writer of the Fourth Gospel says in the prologue, “and from his fullness have we all received grace upon grace” (John 1:16,17). In the experience of grace we are able to do things that go beyond our normal powers. And when we do, we may say, “It is not really I who am doing this, but God working in and through me,” and yet, as Donald Baillie in his classic book, *God Was In Christ*, affirms: it is in such moments that we are most truly ourselves.

Paul makes a sharp distinction between the fact of sin in our lives and the law as the articulated commandment of God. The law, the Torah, the commandments of God have a positive value in giving expression to wrongful acts. The real culprit in our lives is something else, a force far more sinister—Sin. It is a force lurking within the self that distorts our best intentions and keeps the law from achieving its desired purpose.

To whom then does one turn? Paul assures us that God uses even our suffering for good: suffering, he says, produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us.

I went last week to a fund-raiser for an organization which I chaired for a number of years. One of the most satisfying aspects of that stint came when we took over an abandoned nursing home and completely rehabbed it into Interfaith House, a sixty-bed healing refuge on Chicago’s West Side for ill and hurting homeless people. Think about this for a moment: say you are homeless and you get desperately sick. The most likely hospital to take you as a charity case is Cook County, a facility which has some of our world’s finest doctors practicing medicine under conditions that are absolutely shameful. And what happens when you are released from Cook County? That’s when Interfaith House takes you in.

One of the most inspiring people at Interfaith House is a staff member named Cynthia Nowell. A tall, imposing African-American woman with tattoos on her arms, she tells an amazing story.

In 1995, Cynthia was admitted to Interfaith House as a resident. She was addicted to drugs and had lost custody of her children to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Her case managers at the house got her admitted into a detoxification program, brought her back to the house after twenty-one days and worked with her on a daily basis as spiritual, emotional and moral counselors. She is clean and sober and has her children back, and she is now a case manager in her own right. She knows about suffering and she knows how to work with those who like her have fallen prey to drugs and homelessness and despair

The awe-ful truth, dear friends, is that religion, true religion, costs something. Two experienced observers of the American church scene, Rodney Stark and James Finke, in their book, *The Empty Church: The Suicide of Liberal Christianity*, declare that mainline Protestantism has made a big mistake in not demanding more of its members. A People tend to value religion on the basis of how costly it is to belong Cthe more one must sacrifice in order to be in good standing, the more valuable the religion. @

Kierkegaard said it succinctly and powerfully in the nineteenth century:

“The situation in the church is not that the clergy are sunken in dissoluteness and wild debauchery, by no means; no, it is sunken in inanity, in tribal philistinism, and they drag the parishioners down into this flat mediocrity and absence of spirit Y[which] has blabbered Christianity down into something meaningless, into being spiritless impotence, suffocated in illusion.”

We cannot renew the church without grace. We can only find new life when we open our lives to God’s intervention.

To go back to Victor Hugo’s story, the bishop’s first gracious act, taking the convict in and giving him a meal and a bed, was not enough to change the course of Jean Valjean’s life. A second act of even greater generosity was needed to through to someone so deeply alienated - the reckless gamble the bishop made of giving him the silver candlesticks and setting him free to become an honest man.

When we reduce life to economic considerations alone and we live a “you-get-what-you-deserve” set of values, hearts contract and compassion and kindness dry up. It is only when we realize that we, too, are receivers of astonishing mercy that our hearts open and our fists unclench and we become givers.

Do you remember that wonderful movie, *Babette’s Feast*? It’s about such a transformation of grace. The film portrays a religious group that has become fractious but still reveres the memory of its long-departed founder. Their traditions and rituals have

become ends in themselves; they have been emptied of the power they once possessed and conveyed. A political refugee named Babette comes into their midst. Unknown to them she was a great French cook, an artist. The religious community hires her to be their housemaid and instructs her to prepare their usual fare: boiled fish and tea.

After some years, Babette comes into a nice sum of money and asks if she can be allowed to prepare a French dinner. The group is nervous about this departure from their usual routine and as the day of the feast approaches they fear that they have been placed in the hands of some sort of witch who will weave a spell. Indeed Babette does weave a spell. The feast becomes a religious experience, an experience of grace which prompts transformation and renewal and reconciliation among the members of the group. They experience their own need for God's grace and a power not their own.

We come back to the story of Jean Valjean. Years after his encounter with the bishop and his conversion through grace, a crisis arose in his life. By this time he had become a pillar of society, mayor of the city and respected by all for his integrity. The trouble was that he had long ago committed a crime and he had remained undiscovered as the perpetrator. Now an innocent person has been arrested for that crime. The very grace that had brought Jean to his present position now plunged him into the most trying moral struggle of his life. As Hugo describes it, it is as if an angel and a demon were locked in deadly combat for possession of Valjean's conscience.

If he remained silent, he would be the greatest of hypocrites. If he spoke out, then his long painful climb from criminality to decency would be wiped out at a stroke. Valjean met the demand of conscience and saved the innocent victim.

Grace had not made life easier for him. But surely grace had triumphed, for he had himself become a mediator of grace. He did it just in time. At the right time, St. Paul says, God comes to us. And offers us grace so that we may become mediators of grace to others. Just in time.