

From a Mess to a Masterpiece

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Genesis 25:29-34; Romans 8:1-6

This week I read a revealing article titled, “The Curse of the Second-born Child Is Real.” The article confirmed what many parents have known for a long-time that the second-born child--especially if that child is a *boy*--can be a handful.

According to MIT researchers, the second-born son is more likely to get suspended, become a juvenile delinquent, or go to prison. “If you have a son who’s the youngest or middle child,” the article concludes, “you’re going to want to watch them like a freakin’ hawk.”

Now I am a second-born son, the middle son wedged between two sisters. And as both my sisters, along with my good wife, can attest, I am a born antagonist. At a very early age, I cultivated aggravating my sisters to an art form. And to this day, I have a non-compliant, naughty little boy inside aching to get out.

In fact, I probably became a minister in part as a defense mechanism against my own deeply-inbred devilish tendencies. The problem is, my ministerial calling didn’t arrest those tendencies. It just drove them underground where you’re apt to miss them in the sheen of my halo!

You probably have kinks and quirks you wrestle with but have proven powerless to master. Maybe you are judgmental or controlling or snarky. Maybe you are petty or prissy or just plain mean. And maybe, from time-to-time, you've tried to do better. But all your attempts at reform are short-lived and never very successful. As even Paul, the renowned apostle confesses in Romans Chapter 7, "I can *will* the good, but I cannot *do it*. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

And yet, when we turn the page to Romans Chapter 8, everything changes. At least to hear Paul tell it, everything changes: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death" (8:1-2).

Suddenly, Paul introduces new power, a new dynamic that is a game-changer: The "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." Hearing those words, perhaps we feel the faintest flutter of hope that with God's help, our longing to grow into someone, just a little more like Jesus, might have a chance. Granted, it's a snowball's chance in hell. But what if God's grace is so mysterious and mighty, it reaches even *there*?!

But immediately after sounding this liberating promise, Paul launches into a confounding discussion of life in the flesh and life in the Spirit. Such language is apt to get us into trouble because we hear the word *flesh* and think, *body*. If we're not careful, that tragic spirit/body dualism that has done so much harm in Christian tradition takes root in us.

But for Paul, the "flesh" does not equal "the body." The body can be the instrument of delighting and serving God he makes clear in chapter 12: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present *your bodies* as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (12:1).

No, for Paul, the flesh is not the world of food and sex and sweat and work, all of which, rightly expressed, can be some of God's choicest gifts. Rather, the flesh is all the ways we turn

away from God and neighbor to be utterly absorbed in ourselves. In fact, if every time you read Paul refer to “the flesh,” you do a quick search and replace and insert “the self-centered life” for “the flesh,” you’ll be a lot closer to Paul’s meaning than by imagining God has a problem with chocolate.

When a little girl’s younger brother broke her favorite doll, she took swift and severe revenge. She pushed him down, called him a name, and then spit on him, leaving the little fellow in tears.

Later, trying to debrief the incident, the father said to her, “Honey, I think the devil got into you.” But to her credit, the child answered honestly: “The devil might have made me push him down and call him names, but I thought of ‘spittin’ on him all by myself!”

That’s what Paul means by the flesh: Always looking out for Number 1, even at the expense of others.

In the story of Jacob and Esau, Esau--the strapping, manly son who throws away his birthright for a bowl of pottage--represents what Paul calls life in the flesh. But so does Jacob, the cunning, conniving *second* son who, for all his gifts and drive, turns out to be a bigger hot mess than his brother! In fact, when Paul unpacks the sins of the flesh in Galatians Chapter 5, only 3 of the 15 mentioned have anything to do with the body (5:19-21). The overwhelming majority, 12 out of 15, have to do with selfish attitudes and actions toward *others*.

How does “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus set (us) free from the law of sin and death?” First, by shifting the center of gravity in this struggle from *us* to *God*. This epic shift from life centered on *us* to life centered on *God* is what the Bible calls “grace.”

Grace means there’s nothing you can do to earn God’s love because God has already showered, embraced, and hugged you close with all the love there is. Grace means there are no ladders left to climb and no hoops to jump through in your endless quest for perfection because you’re already home free. Grace means God is not an angry judge, poised to

condemn, but a loving grandmother, face covered with the powdery flour of the cake she is baking just for you, ever eager to pull you up onto her lap, snuggle you close, and tell you how special you are.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus . . . For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending (God’s) own son . . . to *deal with sin*.” Christ “dealt with sin” by dying on the cross to show, saint and sinner alike, that there is nothing in all creation, not even *that* can separate us from the love of God for us in Christ Jesus our Lord!” (Romans 8:38-39).

No one ever said it better than Paul Tillich in his moving sermon, "You Are Accepted."

Grace strikes us . . . when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted.’ You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know.

Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace.

The second movement in giving the law of sin and death the slip to live free in Jesus Christ is to set your mind on the Spirit (Rom. 8:5-6). This challenge reminds us we have a role to play in our own transformation. Our work is to *set our mind* on the Spirit, to *walk in* the Spirit (8:4), which doesn’t mean setting about to earn the salvation, already freely given. Rather, our work is to root ourselves in those places and people where grace is most apt to find us. Such as giving ourselves away in service to others or by finding in Christian community the forgiveness and encouragement we could never give ourselves. It is in seeking to learn and live the way of Jesus that we become the good soil where God’s Word and Spirit find fertile ground to unfold and flower (Mark 4:8, 20).

In a recent column titled, "Seeing Is Believing," Sharon Randall wrote of watching her son shoot basketball. One after another, his shots from all over the backyard court went sailing through the net.

"How do you do that?" asked the admiring mom.

Her son bounced the ball, held it aloft, and gazed at the hoop. "Before I release the ball," he told her, "I see it in my mind going through the net."

Then he took the shot and "swish," nothing but net.

"The same might be said for (our own) healing," Randall observed. "We need to believe it can happen, picture it in our minds, to see it in reality. It's not a guarantee. The boy missed on occasion. He wasn't happy about that. But he made far more shots than he missed."

To set the mind on the Spirit means daring to believe you and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, working together, can gradually grow you in the direction of your dreams. No, even a faith like that this is no guarantee of success. You're still going to miss some shots, snap at your spouse, or due to exhaustion or neglect, ignore a neighbor's hurt or need.

But the more you try to be the person God is calling you to be, the more surprised you'll be to discover you're not alone in this struggle. For the Holy Spirit, the giver of life, keeps showing up to grace you with a strength and savvy not your own. In the Spirit's presence and power, you experience not perfection, but a measure of success, as you slowly grow into a person more like Jesus.

Which brings us to the third and final movement toward the new life Jesus died, and is dying, to give. This new life in the Spirit seeks a new kind of beauty and a new kind of you. No longer is the end game some kind of super-human accomplishment that is clearly beyond your grasp. No longer is the goal trying to become who somebody else thought you ought to be. No, this new life in Christ frees you to explore who you are in him, who you can be with Jesus in your life instead of who you are without him.

And this new person, this Christ-centered you, is considerably easier to live with than the old you. Because gradually, in Christ's company, you learn to be as gracious and kind toward yourself as you strive to be toward others. You learn to chuckle at your failings and follies, knowing that in his able hands, they are but grist for the mill of discipleship. Why he can take even your quirks and your quibbles, your kinks and your second-child syndrome, and turn a devilish delight in the wrong things into a Demon Deacon energy for doing the right things, until even the scars and wounds of your failures and losses are woven in the uniquely beautiful tapestry of God's one and only you.

This week, I watched my wife wrestling with a painting. At times, both she and the painting were a mess: her jeans spotted by wet drops of yellow and blue, her hair matted by sweat, and her palette splattered with slippery, slobbery gobs of the rainbow.

And yet, it was a labor of love, a portrait of a dog offered up as a memorial to someone's sacred pup, now gone. So she struggled to do it justice and get it right.

To be sure, not every part of the process was easy or rewarding. But she persisted, often into the wee hours of the morning, until from the mess of her palette and struggle and canvas came a masterpiece.

Of course, you could just take a picture of the dog. And that photograph would have been just about perfect. Indeed, with the help of Photoshop, that picture could be *better* than perfect.

But it's the brush strokes etched in the oil, the vividness of the colors, and the blood, sweat, and tears poured into the painting's creation, that gives it vitality and life. So that what my wife, the artist created, was not a picture-perfect reproduction of somebody's dog, but an original, unique, wonderfully human and even *imperfect* depiction of someone's furry, faithful friend.

And that, dear brothers and sisters, is what God is after in you: Not a cookie-cutter recreation of somebody else's idea of perfection, but the new person you become as the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets you free from the law of sin and death."

That's how, by God's grace, you can go from a mess to a masterpiece. Because in the messiness of your life, right here, right now--just as you are--the Master yearns for the chance to unleash the uniquely, zany, wild and wonderful . . . *You*. Until you, too, are a Master-piece like none other as the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *sets you free*.

O holy Christ, thank you for that ache in our hearts to be more and do more than we are. Just help us be more and do more about you, and not us. For it is in your company and in the power of your Spirit that we are freed to become who we were always meant to be: the blessed and beloved sons and daughters of God. Amen.

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