

SLD06.26.05 13th Ordinary
EPC
Romans 7:14-25
Jill Oglesby Evans

“St. Augustine – 4th Century ‘Bad Boy’”

Today’s “saint,” in the Reformed sense of the word, is Saint AuGUSTine, if you’re trying to impress people, Saint AUgustine, if you’re just talking about the town in Florida. I sort of go back and forth.

Considered by many to be the most important Christian theologian since the Apostle Paul, St. Augustine was born in Africa, in what is now Algeria, and was raised a Christian, but left behind the blessed life once he started attending school in Carthage, which was sort of the fourth century’s Daytona Beach – spring break all year ‘round. In his youth, Augustine fathered an illegitimate son but by the age of 21, he began to get serious about spirituality, undertaking a deep and lengthy study of philosophy, theology and religion while teaching school in Milan. And then, on Easter Day in the year 387, reads a website called Cocktail Party Cheat Sheets, Augustine was baptized a Christian, and the Church would never be the same.¹

Despite Augustine’s impact over the centuries on the development of Christian thought, his beginnings were decidedly unholy. Something like a cross between Brad Pitt and Denzel Washington – handsome, smart, slick, quick, a rabble rouser with a disarming smile, a hopeless flirt, a trouble maker who was just too cute for his own good. Now, Augustine’s mama was a whole ‘nother matter. Renown for her patience, faith, submission and determination, St. Monica really *was* a saint, and not just because of all the crying and grieving and praying she did over her boy’s errant and wicked ways. But ask anybody in 4th century Tagaste or Madura or Carthage or Milan and

¹ <http://www.mentalfloss.com/cheatsheets/augustine/>

you'd hear in a heartbeat how young, brilliant, dark-skinned Augustine of North Africa was no kind of a saint. In fact, what *he* was famous for around town was one of the more excellent pick-up lines of the centuries: "Lord, make me chaste, but not yet!"²

Because Augustine was so 'specially smart, holy Monica and her pagan husband sent him off at the age of seventeen to Carthage so he could get the best education available. At the time, Carthage was pretty much the New York City of Latin-speaking Africa. And while Gus didn't exactly *neglect* his studies, he definitely made it his business to enjoy the many pleasures available in the political, economic, and cultural beehive of 4th century Carthage. It wasn't long before he took on a concubine, nor long before they had a son whom he named Adeodatus, or "given by God."³

Like most young men of his time preparing for careers as lawyers or politicians, Augustine was a student of rhetoric. And what we need to know about the art of rhetoric in 4th century Africa is that it was all about speaking and writing elegantly and persuasively. Speaking the "truth," whatever that may be, was not at issue. The key to mastering rhetoric was not *what* you said but *how* you said it.

But one of the great rhetoricians Augustine studied was that famous orator of classical Rome, Cicero. And besides being a master of language, Cicero happened to be a philosopher. And philosophers are forever concerning themselves with "truth." Augustine's study of Cicero so deeply influenced him he surprised everyone by setting out on his own quest for truth, a quest that was to become both tortuous and life-long.

The first stop of Augustine's truth-quest was Manicheism, a popular religion of his time, founded by a fellow named Mani, who was not, as his name might imply, a New York cab driver, but a third century Persian savant. And what Mani believed was that

² Ibid.

³ The Story of Christianity, Justo Gonzalez, Vol. 1, Harper and Row, San Francisco, 1984, p.208.

the human predicament is the presence in each of us of two principles – one of light and one of darkness. As for the earlier gnostics, salvation to Mani consisted in our separating these two principles and preparing our spirit for its return to its true home in the realm of pure light.

Now, this made sense to Augustine. Who *hadn't* struggled endlessly between darkness and light? Not only did Mani's system hold immense appeal to Augustine's developing sense of logic; it also ridiculed those very aspects of Christianity that give so many people so much trouble - like all that stuff about the cross and self-sacrifice and discipline and whatnot.⁴

And then, of course, there was the Christian conundrum around evil. Mother Monica had taught Augustine that there is only one God, and that God is good. So what better could explain the evil that Augustine saw around and within himself if not some dark alternative to God, like Mani taught? So Augustine settled himself into the study of Manichaeism – for nine years! – but never could quite tattoo it on his heart.

Continuing his quest, he moved to Milan, Italy, to study another philosophy with religious overtones called Neoplatonism. “Unlike the Manichaean duality between light and dark, Neoplatonism affirmed that there is only one principle, and that all reality derives from that principle like concentric ripples on water hit by a pebble. In Neoplatonism, evil doesn't originate from some separate source or entity; it consists simply in the movement away from the Source itself. Neoplatonism taught that “Evil is real but not a ‘thing in itself.’ Rather it is a choice, a decision, an act of will that moves away from Goodness”⁵

⁴ Ibid, p.210

⁵ Ibid.

Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism – Augustine studied all three but none seemed finally to satisfy. Until, weary of questing and studying, all this lively, bright, “bad boy” of divided faith *really* wanted was to forget all this God-talk and just enjoy the pleasures of the flesh, the pleasures of being alive. But his mind and heart would give him no peace.

Observing both his searching studies and his perennial discontent, Mother Monica suggested Augustine go check out this preacher in Milan who had a knack for making sense of scripture. He does do and he likes the guy, only there remains this other problem....

You see, Augustine knows about himself that he’s not much of one for doing things part way. He doesn’t just flirt with the girls, he gets them pregnant. He doesn’t just flirt with Manichaeism, he commits himself to it for nine years. If he starts down the Christianity path, why, he’s liable to end up giving up his career in rhetoric, his wine and song, and his girls, and devoting his whole blasted life to it. Which just doesn’t sound like any fun at all.

The belief that the only way to become a proper Christian was through celibacy, discipline, and physical mortification is, fortunately, *not* an aspect of Augustine’s theology that flourishes after him. At least not, judging from Sally’s porch party last night, among Presbyterians. But for Augustine, mercy. He wrote, “When I thought of devoting myself entirely to you, my God...it was *I* that wished to do it, and *I* that wished *not* to do it. It was *I*. And since I neither completely wished, nor completely refused, I fought against myself and tore myself to pieces.”

Bless his heart, he really *wanted* to become a Christian, but it sounded like *such* a drag. And so he struggled. And continued praying his pick-up line: “Lord, make me chaste...just not quite yet.”

Until one day he was sitting in a garden under a fig tree crying “*How long, Lord, how long? Will it be tomorrow and always tomorrow? Why does not my uncleanness not end this very moment?!*” when suddenly he hears a child’s voice in the distance saying, “Take up and read. Take up and read.”⁶ So he takes up the manuscript sitting on his lap and he reads some words of the Apostle Paul that pierce his heart and push him right on over the edge of his indecision. Nobody knows for sure just what those words were, but as good a guess as any are the words from Paul’s own confession in this morning’s text:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ...Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ...Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Perhaps through these words, perhaps through some others, the Holy Spirit reaches right into the messy midst of Augustine’s struggle, grabs him by his indecisive shoulders and gives him a shake, sets him down, and pushes him on down the road he’s meant to travel. At that very moment, he gets up and trots off to be baptized.

At least, that’s how he tells it in *his* book called Confessions. What a dismal sinner he’d been and how much he had struggled and what he finally came to believe. In fact, the tale of Augustine’s personal faith journey is actually one of his greatest legacies to Christians through the ages. To “regard human experience, notably one’s own life story – as an appropriate starting point for reflecting on God” was completely radical for his time. Yet the sharing of faith stories is essential to this day, especially when we receive new members or examine new elders. Again and again and again we resurrect our faith stories for one another, not only because they change as we do, but

⁶ Ibid, p. 7

because there's simply no better starting point for authentic relationship with God than our own personal spiritual journeys.

In any case, at the age of 32, Augustine finally gets baptized into the Christian faith, devotes himself entirely to the service of God, and everything gets easier, right? Well, no, it really doesn't. For one thing, once Augustine embraces Christianity, he sure enough quits his job, gives away his money, and wants nothing more than to withdraw into an orderly religious community of friends who share his goal of mystical contemplation.

Only a local scheming churchman and perhaps God as well, seem to have other ideas for him. Listen to how they trick Augustine into serving the church in a *different* way.

Augustine is visiting the city of Hippo in northern Africa to talk a friend into joining his contemplative community. One Sunday he goes to church and the preacher, Bishop Valerius, spots him out there in the congregation and he thinks to himself, "hmmm." Recognizing a golden opportunity when he sees one, Valerius suddenly starts preaching about how God is always sending shepherds to the flock at just the right time. Then he asks the congregation to start praying real hard for God's guidance just in case there might be somebody among them, why, perhaps even *that very day*, whom God may have sent to be their minister.

So everybody starts praying real earnestly, and sort of glancing around to see if anyone's glowing. And there's ole' Valerius in the pulpit staring unflinchingly straight at Augustine. And there's Augustine, frozen like a deer in headlights. And what do you know but that despite his protestations, they ordain him that very day to become "co-bishop" with Valerius.

Pretty neat, huh? Skip the whole search process and just vote on whoever's handy? Or visiting. ✍

But then, tough luck for Gus, old Valerius up and dies and who do you think ends up having to run the whole show all by himself? So much for a life of contemplation. Fortunately for us, though, this turn of events forces Augustine to apply his considerable intellect to the raging doctrinal controversies of his day, with the result that he becomes what one scholar calls a "great architect of Western thought."⁷

Now, the Catholics have always embraced Augustine's work. But it was his radical emphasis on grace as the (single) means to salvation that, eleven hundred years later, caught the attention and profoundly influenced the thinking of 16th century Reformers Luther and Calvin. (That, and Augustine was probably something of an alter ego to Calvin, who never was known as the life of the party.) The brilliant manner in which Augustine countered the teachings of a highly regarded monk from Britain by name was Pelagius was what especially sealed Augustine's influence on Calvin.

The monk Pelagius, who had become famous for his piety, austerity and disciplined life, saw *the Christian life as a constant effort through which one's sins could be overcome and salvation attained*. Who does that sound like? Mani, right? So while Pelagius agreed with Augustine that God made us free and that the source of evil is in the will, *he believed this meant that human beings always have the ability to overcome their sin.*⁸ This, of course, was a rather sore point for Augustine who, you remember, had concluded that he was

**...of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin....
...I can will what I want 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.**

⁷ All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1999., p.370.

⁸ The Story of Christianity, p. 214.

Augustine concluded that maybe the human will wasn't quite so simple or manageable as Pelagius made it out to be. So, opposing Pelagius, he wrote that the power of sin is such that it takes hold of our will, and as long as we are under its sway we cannot move our will to be rid of it. The best we can do is engage in that struggle between willing and not willing. This is the human condition. It's not that freedom has disappeared; the sinner is still free to choose among various alternatives. But all of these are sin; *the one alternative not open to humanity is to cease sinning.*⁹

The one alternative *not* open to humanity is to cease sinning.

Wait a minute. One moment we're walking around shining like the sun, emanations of the goodness of God, and the next we're, as Calvin says, so completely estranged from God's righteousness that (we can) conceive, desire, and undertake, only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous. (Institutes of the Christian Religion, II, V, 19)¹⁰

Which is it going to be?

Can both be true? Are we talking a "half full/half empty" scenario? Or fundamentally an existential conundrum? Maybe you stand with Pelagius, who had a regard for positivism and progressivist history – you know, how we're getting better at being human all the time. But that was not the conclusion of the Apostle Paul or Augustine or Calvin. What, to a theologian, *they* all insist is that "there is no human act, no matter how innocent or well intended that is without sin." We cannot, by acts of will, overcome the sin that is in us. Rather, the way this trio of great minds saw it, with unfathomable grace, God keeps reaching right into the messy midst of human history to

⁹ The Story of Christianity, p. 214.

¹⁰ A Calvin Treasury, selected and edited by Wm. F. Keesecker, Harper Bros., New York, 1961, p. 125.

grab us, shake us a little, set us down, and push us on down the road God wants us to travel, the one traveled by God's beloved One, Jesus Christ.

The insistence that salvation owes nothing to human efforts, that salvation is by grace alone, that only through the transforming power of Jesus Christ is anyone made whole, these essentials of Reformed thinking we owe to John Calvin, to be sure. But Calvin owes them to Augustine, who found great peace in their perspective. Certainly *his* life had shown him that no matter how hard he tried, he could not attain salvation on his own. To be sure, sin abounded in the life of the Bad Boy of Hippo, but grace abounded even more, such that his life has been described finally as “a hymn of praise, a love song to the God who was always closer to him than his own heartbeat.”¹¹

May the serpentine stories of our own lives become, finally, hymns of praise to God. May we, too, learn finally, Augustine's most famous lesson that “You have made us for Yourself, O God, “and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” For who, finally, will save us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7:25) To the glory of God. Amen.

¹¹ All Saints, p. 372.