

SLD06.26.05 13th Ordinary
EPC
Romans 7:14-25
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“St. Gus – 4th Century ‘Bad Boy’”

If you noticed the title of today’s sermon – ‘St. Gus – 4th Century ‘Bad Boy,’ perhaps you guessed that ‘Gus’ is short for Augustine, and that, however often he is referred to today as **Saint** Augustine, it wasn’t *a/ways* that way. Oh no. Ask anybody in 4th century Tagaste or Madaura or Carthage or Milan; young, brilliant, dark-skinned Gus of northern Africa was no kind of a saint, despite how much his mama wanted him to be. Now, his mama was another matter. Gus’s Mama really was a saint, and not just the way many mamas are. Gus’s mama, Monica, fervent Christian that she was, forever crying and praying and grieving over her boy’s errant and wicked ways, St. Monica was canonized sure enough by the Catholic church, no doubt in large part because of what she had to put up with from ‘ole Gus.

Friend Gus, on the other hand, was more like a cross between James Dean and Denzel Washington – handsome, smart, quick, slick; a rabble rouser with a disarming smile; a party animal, a hopeless flirt, a trouble maker who was just too cute for his own good. When his friends thought of good ole Gus, ‘Saint’ was hardly the first word that came to mind.

But 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 indulgent Gus took on a concubine, and it wasn't long before they had a son, whom Gus named Adeodatus which means 'given by God.' ¹

Like most young men of his time preparing for careers as lawyers or public functionaries, Gus - well, he's a daddy now so we'll call him Augustine - Augustine was a student of rhetoric. And we need to know that the purpose of learning rhetoric in 4th century Africa was to speak and write elegantly and persuasively. Speaking the 'truth,' whatever that may be, was not at issue. But it so happened that, among the great rhetoricians Augustine studied was the famous orator of classical Rome, Cicero. And besides being a master of language, Cicero was also a philosopher. And 'truth' is always at issue for philosophers.

The study of Cicero so deeply influenced Augustine that the young ne'er do well surprised everyone by launching out on his own quest for truth, a quest that was to become both tortuous and life-long. Initially Augustine's truth-quest led him to Manichaeism, a popular religion of the time. Manichaeism was founded by a fellow named Mani, who was not, as his name might imply, a New York cab driver, but rather, a third century Persian savant. And what Mani believed was that the human predicament is the presence in each of us of two principles – one of light and one of darkness. Salvation to Mani, as for the earlier gnostics, consisted in separating these two principles and preparing our spirit for its return to the realm of pure light.

Among the attractions of Manichaeism for Augustine was that it offered a *rational* system of truth which held immense appeal to Augustine's developing sense of logic. Plus Manichaeism ridiculed those very aspects of Christianity that gave Augustine so

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

much trouble, like all that stuff about the cross and self-sacrifice and discipline. Plus, like Augustine, Manichaeism had no time for the materialistic and primitive language of scripture,² which hardly met the rhetorical standards of the day.

And then there was that Christian conundrum around the origin of evil that gave Augustine such fits. Mama Monica had taught him that there was only one God and that God was good. So what could explain the evil that Augustine was forever seeing in and around himself if not some dark alternative to God, like Mani taught?

So Augustine settled himself into the study of Manichaeism - for nine years! But for some reason he never could quite tattoo it on his heart. Something about it just didn't satisfy. So Augustine decided to move to Milan, Italy for the study of another philosophy with religious overtones, Neo-Platonism.

“Unlike the Manichean duality between light and dark, Neo-Platonism affirmed that there was only one principle, and that all reality was derived from it through a series of emanations – like concentric circles that appear on the surface of the water when hit by a pebble. ...So evil doesn't originate from a separate source; it consists simply in moving away from the One. ...Evil's real but it's not a 'thing in itself; rather it's a choice, a decision, an act of will that moves away from Goodness.”³ That's what Neo-Platonism taught.

Manichaeism, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, these were the directions of philosophy and thought that occupied Augustine's mind early in his early faith journey. A brilliant man, passionate, questing, ever gobbling up life, all this 'bad boy' of divided faith ever *really* wanted was simply to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh and the material

² Ibid, p.210

world. But regrettably, his mind and heart would not let him rest until he had pressed to their logical conclusion any number of popular views about God and soul until he'd discovered to his personal satisfaction whatever 'truth' they might, or might not, hold. And satisfaction was the one thing that continued to elude Augustine.

Noticing his perennial discontent, Mama Monica suggested that Augustine check out this preacher in Milan named Ambrose. Monica knew all about her boy's intellectual struggle with Christianity and she knew, too, that this Ambrose had a reputation for helping make sense of scripture. And, sure enough, by interpreting allegorically some of the particularly tricky passages in Scripture, Ambrose succeeds in rendering scripture more understandable, and acceptable to Augustine.

But still Augustine can't quite bring himself forward at the altar call. There's this other problem....

You see, knowing about himself that he's not one for doing things half-way (he doesn't just flirt with the girls, he makes them pregnant; he doesn't just flirt with Manichaeism, but dedicates himself to its study for nine years), Augustine knows that if he becomes Christian, there's no way he'll be lukewarm about it. No, he'll end up devoting his whole blasted life to it – give up his career in rhetoric, give up his wine and song, give up his girls. And giving up all that physical pleasure, well, that didn't sound like any fun at all!

Now you and I don't necessarily equate discipleship with denying the celebration and enjoyment of the physical pleasure – this, fortunately, is *not* an aspect of Augustine's theology that flourished after him. But the way Augustine saw it, the only

³ Ibid.

way he could become a proper Christian was through celibacy and physical mortification. And what a battle raged inside the man!

Later 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. Augustine really *wanted* to become a Christian, but it sounded like *such* a drag. And so he struggled. And so he prayed to God, “give me chastity and continence, Lord; but not too soon.”

Until *finally*, as he tells it in his great spiritual autobiography entitled Confessions, finally, one day, he’s 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 he hears a child’s voice saying ‘Take up and read. Take up and read. Take up and read.’”⁴

So he takes up the manuscript he’s been perusing and reads some riveting words of the Apostle Paul’s that pierce his heart and push him on over the edge of his indecision. Nobody know what those words were – so it’s as good a guess as any that they were from today’s text in which Paul confesses:

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 it was through these words, perhaps through some others, that the Holy Spirit reaches right into the messy midst of Augustine’s struggle and grabs him by his

indecisive shoulders and shakes him up and pushes him on down the road in the direction God wants him to go. Because at that moment, Augustine gets up and goes off to get baptized.

At least, that's how he tells it in *his Confessions*. What a dismal sinner he was and how he struggled and what he finally came to believe. In fact, the tale itself of Augustine's faith journey is one of his many great legacies. To 'regard human experience, notably one's own life story – as an appropriate starting point for reflecting on God' was radical for his time. Yet the sharing of our faith stories is a practice we continue to this day, especially when seeking ordination as a teaching or ruling elder. Again and again and again we tell our faith stories to one another because we now believe there's simply no better starting point for reflecting on God than our own personal journeys of faith.

In any case, finally, at the age of 32, Augustine gets baptized into the Christian faith, devotes himself entirely to the service of God, and things get easier, right? No, they really don't. For one thing, as predicted, once Augustine embraces Christianity, he quits his job, gives away most of his money, and wants nothing more than to withdraw into an orderly community of friends who share his goal of mystical contemplation and philosophical inquiry (which sounds lovely to me.) But apparently God and a local manipulative churchman have other ideas for Augustine, collaborating to trick him into being the Bishop of Hippo. Listen to how they do it:

One day Augustine is visiting the city of Hippo in northern Africa to talk a friend into joining his contemplative community. He goes to church one Sunday and the preacher, one Bishop Valerius, sees Augustine out there in the congregation and he

⁴ Ibid, p. 7

thinks to himself, 'hmmm.' See, because of his extraordinary intelligence and his ardor for God and his excellent speaking skills, ole Gus has acquired quite a little reputation in the 'hood.

So Valerius, recognizing a golden opportunity when he sees one, suddenly starts preaching about how God always sends shepherds for 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 *that very day*, whom God has sent to be their minister.

So the congregation starts praying real hard and sort of glancing around the pews to see whom God might have sent, and there's Augustine, sitting there like a deer in headlights. And what do you know but that despite his protestations, they ordain him that very day to be 'co-bishop' with Valerius.

Pretty good trick, huh? Short-circuit the whole search process and just vote on whoever's handy?

But then, tough luck for Gus, ole Valerius up and dies and Augustine has to run the whole show all by himself. So much for a life of contemplation. Oh well. But the good news for us, if not for Augustine, is that this turn of events forces Augustine to apply his considerable insight and intellect to the doctrinal controversies percolating in the church of his day. With the result that he becomes one of the most influential figures in the entire history of Christianity, a 'great architect of Western thought,' as one writer calls him, a revered doctor of the church, as well as the single favorite theologian

of the great Protestant reformers of the 16th century, including John Calvin.⁵ Can you begin to see why he's so important to us?

Here's one example of the kind of controversies Augustine had to deal with: the question arose as to whether the validity of any rite of the church depended upon on the moral virtue of the person administering it. That is, is a sacrament only as good as the person offering it. Augustine said "no, the Holy Spirit seals a sacrament, not the officiant or his standing before God. And most of the Western church continues to agree with Augustine's position that a baptism is equally efficacious whether you're baptized by a saint or a jerk.

Another controversy Augustine tackled was the principle of 'just war.' Remember? We talk about the just war theory last Memorial Day Sunday?

But the controversy about which Augustine wrote his most important theological works, the ones that sealed his future influence on Protestant reformer, John Calvin, related to the teachings of a highly regarded monk from Britain whose name was Pelagius.

The monk Pelagius had become famous for his piety, austerity and disciplined life. In fact, Pelagius saw *the Christian life as a constant effort through which one's sins could be overcome and salvation attained*. 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.*"⁶ Which touched on, as you might imagine, a rather sore point for Augustine who had concluded that he was

**...of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin....
...I can will what I want but I cannot do it.**

⁵ All Saints, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroad Publishing, New York, 1999., p.370.

⁶ The Story of Christianity, p. 214.

**For I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want is what I do.**

Recalling how hard a time he had had in deciding to become a Christian, how desperate had been his struggle, how it had about done him in, Augustine concluded that maybe the human will wasn't quite so simple or manageable as Pelagius made it out to be. Clearly even among the best of minds and the most faithful of Christians, there were times when the will is simply not its own master.

So, opposing Pelagius, Augustine wrote this: he said, '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 these are sin, and the one alternative that is not open to humanity is to cease sinning.'⁷

And 16th century Reformer John Calvin came squarely down on the side of Augustine. In his monumental Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin writes:

Therefore let us hold this as an undoubted truth which no siege engines can shake: the mind of man has been so completely estranged from God's righteousness that it conceives, desires, and undertakes, only that which is impious, perverted, foul, impure, and infamous. The heart is so steeped in the poison of sin, that it can breathe out nothing but a loathsome stench. But if some men occasionally make a show of good, their minds nevertheless ever remain enveloped in hypocrisy and deceitful craft, and their hearts bound by inner perversity. II, V, 19⁸

This is Calvin's Doctrine of the Total Depravity of Humanity (Calvin was not known for pulling punches) and you can see, can't you, how it is grounded in the theological conclusions of none other than our pal, Gus?

⁷ The Story of Christianity, p. 214.

⁸ A Calvin Treasury, selected and edited by Wm. F. Keesecker, Harper Bros., New York, 1961, p. 125.

Now 'Total Depravity' is a difficult teaching; certainly it was no more popular in Augustine's day than it was in Paul's or Calvin's or our own. Its harsh language is hard to hear and harder still to accept, especially for us good people here at Emory Church who are genuinely doing the best we can. I mean, we know we're not perfect, but 'totally depraved?' That seems a little over the top, doesn't it? Totally depraved was Caligula, Hitler, Timothy McVeigh. We're just a bunch of... you know...
...Presbyterians...for heaven's sake, making our way in urban and suburban America as best we can. Lord knows, we mean well.

But then, so did Pelagius. It could be said that Pelagius had as high a regard for positivism and progressivist history – you know, the idea that we're getting better all the time – as your average resident of Atlanta or Decatur. But Paul and Augustine and Calvin, they all say 'No! There is no human act, no matter how innocent or well intended that is without sin.'

Which, in my mind, speaks first to the humility with which every one of us should walk this earth, never mind the circumspection with which we should judge one another. And secondly, to the unfathomable magnitude of God's grace in reaching into the messy midst of human history, and grabbing us, and shaking us, and pushing us on down the road in the direction God wants us to go, following in the footsteps of God's beloved One, Jesus Christ.

And truly, how else can you and I fully grasp the scope of God's extraordinary grace in Christ Jesus except by recognizing just how unmerited it is? In fact, it is a hallmark of Reformed theology that, in fact, nothing we do, nothing we say, nothing we give, nothing we give up, makes us worthy of that gift. The insistence that salvation

owes nothing to human efforts, that salvation is by grace alone, that only through the transforming power of Jesus Christ are we made whole, all these essentials of Reformed thinking we owe to John Calvin, to be sure, but first to Augustine.

And perhaps not so ironically after all, Augustine found rest and relief in that truth. For life had already shown him that no matter how hard he tried, he was not personally capable of attaining his salvation. But if sin had abounded for the Bad Boy of Hippo, why, grace had abounded even more, such that the story of Augustine's torturous faith journey has been described as finally "a hymn of praise, a love song to the God who was always closer to him than his own heartbeat."⁹

That is my prayer for you and me, that the torturous stories of our own faith journeys become finally hymns of praise to God; indeed, that the words most often quoted of Augustine become finally the hard-won understanding of our own hearts: "You have made us for Yourself, O God, "and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

To the glory of God. Amen.

⁹ All Saints, p. 372.