

Text: Romans 5: 12-19  
Title: A Swirling Cauldron  
Date: 03.01.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

Darwin Brudos looked like a hobbit. I don't mean in a vaguely familiar way, as one might look like a giraffe or a goat or a golden retriever, I mean he looked like a hobbit – as hobbits are described in books about hobbits.

Darwin was short of stature with bowed legs and a barrel chest that settled into his bowling-ball-belly. His face was framed by a wispy white beard – no mustache, just a thin white line circling his round face, bulbous nose, and bright eyes. He often wore a floppy cap atop his bald head and he always ambled along with a certain vigor, as if there was important business to which he must attend.

Darwin and Mrs. Brudos – who also looked like a hobbit – lived in the foot hills of the Adirondacks where they raised honey bees, made wine, heated their home with a woodstove, and powered it with solar panels.

Darwin was quick to speak his mind, and while his eyes twinkled they were just as quick to spark with anger. He was as stubborn as he was stout – and he was pretty sure he was right about most things. But he was very clear about religion.

Religion was simple to Darwin. It all boiled down to one thing: Love God and love neighbor. Anything else was window dressing and speculation. Everything else was ritual, regulation, and rules that cluttered up the truth. And, given this stance, Darwin wouldn't join in a confession of sin. By his estimation he'd done what he was supposed to and he wasn't going to confess what he didn't do.

So, he would sit in his pew silent and stoned face during corporate confession of sin. Sin was a construct created by extraneous rules. In his mind he kept the rule that mattered and there was, therefore, no need for confession.

The Apostle Paul would take exception with Darwin Brudos. Paul paints all of humanity with one bold stroke. No one is excluded when he writes:

*...Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written;  
There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one  
who seeks after God. All have turned away...* *Romans 3:9-11*

According to Paul all of us are under indictment.

In our text this is a reality to which Paul assigns the name “Adam.” Whether Adam was a real person or not is inconsequential; Paul's point is that God's creation has gone terribly wrong and the entire human race is implicated. In the words of Fleming Rutledge:

*...Adam is the name that Paul gives to a development in human existence whereby we have all been taken captive by a power greater than we are, the power of sin and death. It is this power that motivates us, generation after generation, to hate black people or Serbs or Yankees or Tutsi or Jews or homosexuals or whatever. As one exhausted refugee said, "When will it ever end?"*

I don't know what they're called now, but when I was a kid there were above-ground pools and in-ground pools. Above-ground pools offered less depth or space for swimming and you had to make your own fun. So, we would line up, single file alongside the inside edge of the pool, and then run in one direction around the pool. Around and around and around we would run in the water. And...

gradually the current would build,  
gradually the motion would get stronger,  
gradually the power would push you along,  
gradually the tide would take your feet out from under you,  
gradually the pool turned into a swirling cauldron that you couldn't stop and that would pull you under.

For Paul, all humanity is drowning in sin – and the death that is sin's extension. It is a motion, a power, a reality that is all encompassing. It pulls us all under. Listen to how he piles up these lines:

*Sin entered the world... and death with sin... Death came to all because all sinned... Death reigned... Many died by the trespass... Judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation... Death reigned... One trespass was condemnation for all... Through the disobedience of one many were made sinners...*

Whew!

Rather than dive into the deep theological waters of how one bloke's poor choice of fruit in the first chapters of time is responsible for all the hell that follows, I would draw your attention to the motion in the pool.

In creation there's a force at work –

a force greater than the sum of our sins stacked end to end,  
a force that is beyond our power to turn around,  
a force that breaks and buries the beauty of every soul,  
a force that finds expression in every corner of creation,  
a force that is as immediate as the day's headlines,  
and that is indelibly etched in our memories,  
a force that spoils *shalom*,  
a force that finally leads to death.  
That force is sin....

Now. I know it's not fashionable to talk about sin. It offends our sophisticated sensibilities and harkens back to preaching that pounded guilt deep into our collective psyche. But, sin is the only way that I know to make sense of a creation that is marred unto death. Sin is the only thing upon which to hang the brokenness and unspeakable horrors of this world. It is more than ignorance or some pathology or a handful of bad apples spoiling the whole bunch. Sin is somehow greater than the sum of its parts....

Listen to how the Belgic Confession of the 1560s put it:

*...by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race.*

*It is a corruption of all nature – an inherited depravity which infects even small infants in their mother's womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin.... It is therefore so vile and enormous in God's sight that it is enough to condemn the human race, and it is not abolished or wholly uprooted even by baptism, seeing that sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring.*

Pick your imagery or mix your metaphor: the current in a pool or a contaminated spring. Sin swirls, spoils, and soils God's creation unto death.

I was recently with a couple old friends at Roseland Christian Ministries – all of us grayer and softer around the edges than we used to be – when I walked a young woman who grew up around the corner. She has a light-up-the-room-smile, but she came in with a cloud, pulled out a court summons, and said she had to deal with some trouble. And on cue the three of us said in unison:

*In this world you will have trouble....*

That's the opening line of the benediction that Rev. Tony spoke for years at RCM and for the three of us it was as familiar as breathing. We smiled broadly and continued:

*In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, be of good cheer, I have overcome the world....*

The good news for a creation sick unto death is that God in Christ steps into the pool, changes the current, throws the motion in reverse, overcomes the world, and defeats death. The gospels proclaim that God drowns in the death of sin but is resurrected to life and as through Adam comes death, so through Christ comes life.

Like the tympani drummer in an orchestra Paul beats those two drums:

Adam brought judgment; Christ brought justification.

Death through Adam; life through Christ.

Sin through Adam; grace through Christ.

And the drum of grace always beats last and loudest. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends, it's easy to be Darwin Brudos. If sin is little more than missing the mark on a list of rules than most weeks we probably did pretty well. No murder, no stealing, no adultery, and only a little coveting.

And if confession calls for little more than a list of peccadillos and the acknowledgment of our dark thoughts than religion is little more than a culture club and a self-help exercise. (Confession is good for the soul.)

But, if sin is a power unto death than confession is the recognition of our powerlessness and our death. Then confession requires that we name our culpability, repent of our corruption, and join in lament for the vandalism of *shalom*. For finally, education, technology, political philosophy, and an effort of the will cannot change the swirling cauldron of sin.

What's required is a turning of the tide,  
a changing of direction,  
a whole new world order,  
the coming of a kingdom.

Again, Fleming Rutledge:

*With all the passion of which I am capable I urge you to consider the situation. The life of Adam is precarious in the extreme. We are threatened at every turn by disease, crime, loss, accident, intrusion, insanity, terror; what is even worse we are threatened by condemnation – exposure of what we really are, rejection by those whose love we most need, ultimate abandonment by God himself. Humanly speaking this is our inheritance.*

*Paul says, this is what we have narrowly escaped! Jesus Christ, the son of God who is our Judge, has come to our rescue. He has quite literally appeared on the human scene with divine power to save. It is an unparalleled drama of desperate peril and miraculous deliverance – and it is not only my story, but your story.*

Thanks be to God.

In Christ the motion in the pool has changed from sin to salvation, from death to life.

We are joined in confession of sin with that hope.

We come to the table with that promise.

Amen.