

Imperfect Allies

Isaiah 6:1-8; John 3:1-17

May 27, 2018

Brian Russo

“One good deed is not enough to redeem a man of a lifetime of wickedness,” says Commodore Norrington to Captain Jack Sparrow in the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean; Curse of the Black Pearl*.

“One good dead is not enough to redeem a man of a lifetime of wickedness.”

What do you think? Is it not? I don't know, to me it's kind of like that timeless question from old Nicodemus, isn't it? “Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born again?” Which is basically, more or less, can one really just hit reset and start over?

Or put another way, can you live a partially, or completely debased life, for some or even most of it, and yet still have your slate wiped perfectly clean if in a single moment of penitence you wish to turn it around with a confession and a promise to change your ways? Let's say for the sake of argument that you could restart/reset...well, should that also mean that you would be eligible to be judged equitably with those of us who have spent the majority of our lives praying, doing good deeds, and otherwise being, for the most part, pure? I mean, shouldn't there like be different tolls when we all line up before Peter at the pearly gates? An E-ZPass lane for the mostly blameless, a ticket/E-ZPass lane for the average, and a cash only lane for the mostly guilty? Or should there be just one lane for all, and if so, which one? But finally, and more to the point, are there lines that we can and cannot cross before we irrevocably lose the good will of society and of God? Or in the end, can God and maybe even society forgive all, even the most unclean amongst us?

Here's a clearer window to what I'm getting at this morning. It goes by the name of Harvey Weinstein. Now, this guy deserves to be in the longest, most delayed, excruciating cash-only toll lane there is. Right? Same goes for Bill Cosby and too many others as well. But now what about someone like Morgan Freeman? ...Oh Morgan. Why Morgan, why? I think I have seen *The Shawshank Redemption* about 30 times in my life. I know I went to see that horrible *Along Came a Spider* movie when I was a teenager just because he was starring in it. Ah, Morgan... what are you doing? Damn.

Do you know that Morgan Freeman has spearheaded 21 charities and been involved in another 20 good-will causes? He has championed measures to protect the environment; he has established relief-funds for islands damaged by hurricanes in the Caribbean; he has donated to veterinary colleges and schools of medicine; he has aided Mississippi's Animal Rescue shelter; he has been a patron for artists in South Africa; and he has supported CAMFED, the Campaign for Female Education, whose vision is “a world in which every child is educated, protected, respected and valued, and grows up to turn the tide of poverty.”

And yet here's what else we now think we know about Morgan Freeman. According to a report on CNN just days ago, eight women have come forward and have accused him of sexual harassment and assault. Comments about their looks. Comments about his fantasies of and with them. Free-floating hands. A skirt lifted. Just all horrible if true. Of course, he has denied these allegations specifically saying that has never perpetrated an assault or even neared a working definition of that, though he has admitted to making jokes and offering “compliments” that he can now see were unintentionally harmful.

Ah, what a mess. What are we to do? Should we believe him? He's 80 after all, and old people are generally more trustworthy or so we like to kid ourselves. Or should we immediately discredit him as a liar, and cast him like the rest of so many other men in Hollywood: as disgusting, predatory, sinful, criminal. I mean at least he didn't reach Weinstein or Cosby or Louis C.K.-levels, but nonetheless what should we do with Morgan Freeman? Are these allegations damning enough to cost him our grace, his place in our society? Should we boycott his movies and scrutinize his charities? Should we ever listen to anything this guy ever has to say or narrate about again?

In short, how do we reconcile these potential ugly truths with the measure of the rest of his life, these ugly truths against all of his many contributions to the arts, the suffering, the marginalized, etc.? Do they all just go away now?

Better yet, how do we reconcile our own ugly truths with the rest of our otherwise good and decent lives? Do we simply gloss over them? Should we come out and do a tell all? Or do we believe that the totality of our goodness renders our shortcomings rather insignificant, and thus un-noteworthy in the end? How do we reconcile this?

I think the first step for us, here as Christians, is to start not with a flat denial, but with an admittance that yes, we are very far from perfect. For no matter how pure we might fashion ourselves to be, we all fall short. Consciously, subconsciously, overtly, covertly, we are sinners. Through and through. We have each of us been the harassed and the harasser. You might not want to believe it, but yeah, your subtle touch on his arm the other day, or the way you left your hand on her shoulder for a moment too long this morning, you have all encroached upon another's sensitivity and autonomy more times than you can even dare to imagine. And make no mistake, I too am included in this charge. I have skeletons. And you know what, so do you. But honestly I think it would be a shame, maybe even a sin, if any of us here were made to be trudging through the public square, onward and in perpetuity, wearing a list of our offenses pinned to our front without any regard to our benevolences fastened to our back. Such that ever we felt compelled to speak up against an injustice or wrongdoing of some kind, someone else would be right there to remind the world that our name is tarnished and thus our opinion should be wholly ignored if not demonized. No, I just don't think that would be right either.

But now, don't get me wrong. Please don't get me wrong. I am not attempting to defend the indefensible. I am not sanctioning man's often detestable character as it has been throughout the dawn of time. As accused, Morgan Freeman, joking or not, was and is the villain and is guilty of perpetuating wrongs and shattering securities. And that's just in the least. No celebrity or commoner, man or woman, should ever, ever conduct themselves in such a way that others come to feel harassed, belittled, or powerless. Full stop. Ok?

But I guess all I'm trying to say is what the gospel has said for nearly two thousand years. Namely, that Christ came precisely for these. For us. For an unclean people with unclean lips. And more, that Christ charges us, his followers, to forgive these, even ourselves, 77 times over so that once forgiven, we could then rise to the occasion to fight against perhaps the very same ills that we once perpetrated. For like Isaiah, God calls upon us sinners even by name, visiting with us at night and nurturing us in the morning. So that even the least of us can turn and become the greatest of the Kingdom's ambassadors.

If you don't believe me, just think of King David. Liar, adulterer, murderer. King David. Should we blacklist all of his psalms because of his infidelities? Or don't we get something out of his works, their rawness? Or what about Paul, formerly Saul, who was once the great persecutor of Christians. Should we rip his letters, indeed the majority of the New Testament, right out of scripture? Or don't we get something out of their lived wisdom? Personally, I would hate to lose his sayings on love and the gifts of the Spirit. Or what about MLK Jr. and his affairs? Or what about Augustine and his lusts? Or what about Calvin and his execution of Servetus? No, I dare say all of these scoundrels, these imperfect allies in the Lord make up a large percentage of our Holy Text and narrative, and it is through their imperfections, their real three-dimensional lives lived, that we too can share in and tell our mortal story of God's redemptive powers in our own life.

So, may we always remember this then when begin to pick up our stones; when we begin to notice the specks, or even the logs, in our neighbors eyes. When we start to discredit all of the good deeds someone has done for a mistake they committed and are genuinely apologetic for and have moved on from. For just maybe they too have a story, given to them by God, that we are in need of hearing.

For the simple yet radical good news this morning, that I myself wasn't even sure I wanted to hear, is that the wind blows wherever it chosés and anyone can be saved. Anyone can turn from their ways. Anyone can be born again of the Spirit. And all can be forgiven.

...Now, when this ending was pitched last night, Anya took a long, long look at me, paused for a moment, and then with an ounce of surprise and a pound of suspicion, asked “Really? So, even Harvey Weinstein could be forgiven and saved, and end up, you know, up there [Heaven]?”

And as much as my first impulse was to say, Hell no, obviously not him, the Spirit, I think, reminded me that it’s not about my grace, or your grace, the accuser’s grace, or even the church’s grace. It is about God’s grace. And our gracious Word this morning couldn’t be any clearer...

“*Whoever* believes,” John writes. “Whoever comes to believe in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

My friends, this is indeed great, even if unsettling news. For no matter what you’ve done. No matter how unclean your lips have been. No matter the size or the amount of skeletons you have secretly hiding away in your attic. There is still time. Yes, even for you, there is still time to turn it around. To approach the throne of grace. To see the light. To choose to be born again. Though this time not of the flesh, but from above.

There's a place I know // Where the train goes slow // Where sinners can be washed in the blood of the lamb // There's a river by the trestle // Down by Sinner's Grove // Down where the Willow and the Dogwood grows

Down there by the train
Down there by the train
Down there by the train
where the train goes slow

You can hear the whistle // You can hear the bell // From the halls of heaven to the gates of hell
There's room for the forsaken // If you're there on time // You'll be washed of all your sins
And all of your crimes

Down there by the train...

There's a golden moon // That shines up through the mist // I know that your name will be on that list //
There's no eye for an eye // There's no tooth for a tooth // I saw Judas Iscariot carrying John Wilkes Booth

Down there by the train...

So if you live in darkness // If you live in shame // All of the passengers will be treated the same //
Old Humpty Jackson and Gyp the Blood will sing // Charlie Whitman is on the Dillinger's wings

Down there by the train...

If you've lost all your hope // If you've lost all your faith // I know you will be cared for, I know you will be safe //
All the shameful and all of the whores // Even the soldier who pierced the heart of the lord

Is down there by the train...¹

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

¹ Lyrics to the song “Down There By the Train” by Tom Waits