

Even When We Were Dead
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

“But God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.”

What is this state, I wonder, of being dead through our trespasses? We think of trespasses as those things we have done that we ought not to have done. But what if trespasses are more like our wondering unawares and far afield from the love for which we were made? “It’s not the feeling of anything I’ve ever *done*, which I might get away from,” Celia says to Reilly, the psychiatrist in T.S. Eliot’s play *The Cocktail Party*, “or of anything in me I could get rid of—but of emptiness, of failure towards someone, or something, outside of myself; and I feel I must...*atone*—is that the word? Can you treat a patient for such a state of mind?” Can you treat a human being who is dead through her trespasses, running on empty with no filling station in sight, fallen and now in the sort of pieces that all the king’s horses and all the king’s men cannot put together again? God knows, psychologists have tried by talking and psychiatrists by prescribing pills. Self-help authors offer five or ten or twelve manageable steps that, when taken, will make us alive again, and preachers—both the happy-clappy kind and the fire-and-brimstone kind—promise to make us alive separately through the power of positive thinking or guilt-induced conversion.

Yet Celia has come to Reilly not to fix her emptiness or her failure toward someone or something outside of herself. As she says, she knows she cannot get away from or rid herself of the human condition. Rather she comes to Reilly as people come to a priest: to atone—is that the word? The word means to make amends, but its obsolete meaning is to reconcile. Reilly says, “I can reconcile you to the human condition, the condition to which some, who have gone as far as you, have succeeded in returning. They may remember the vision they have had, but they cease to regret it, maintain themselves by the common routine, learn to avoid excessive expectation, become tolerant of themselves and others, giving and taking, in the usual actions what there is to give and take. They do not repine; are contented with the morning that separates and with the evening that brings together for casual talk before the fire two people who know they do not understand each other, breeding children whom they do not understand and who will never understand them.” Celia asks, “Is that the best life?” and Reilly tells her that it is a good life, though she will not know how good until she comes to the end...In a world of lunacy, violence, stupidity and greed,” he says, “...it is a good life.”

Perhaps to be dead through our trespasses is to be reconciled to being no longer disturbed by the emptiness, no longer dogged by our failure toward someone or something outside of ourselves, at one with the common routine, without regret or excessive expectation, a tolerant life, resigned to the human condition. I think of this when I notice that my rage has abated after the latest mass shooting, or when I lay down the burden of racism because I am white and I can, or as I walk past the homeless beggar undisturbed on Walnut Street, or when I shrug at the new normal of division in our national life. Dead in my trespasses. No big deal. No HUGE sin. In a world of lunacy, violence, stupidity and greed, it is a good life.

Yet is it not the small and inconsequential trespasses that dig our emotional and spiritual graves spoonful by spoonful? I wonder if that is why Augustine spills an inordinate amount of ink “examining his motives for robbing a pear tree. ‘Rum thing,’ wrote Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes..., ‘to see a man making a mountain out of robbing a pear tree in his teens.’ But Holmes was wrong to be impatient,” according to Augustine’s biographer Peter Brown. “Only by winnowing every motive that played into that obscure act of small-town vandalism was Augustine able to isolate the very smallest, the most toxic concentrate of all—the chilling possibility that he had acted gratuitously, simply to show that he (like God, and then like Adam) could do whatever he wished.” Dead through your trespasses.

The social consequence of being reconciled to the human condition is what my first Old Testament professor called “the spiraling loss of soul.” You come down to breakfast, he says (mind you, this was the early seventies), and your wife has prepared your oatmeal but forgotten the raisins, which she knows is your favorite part of the morning. You grump off to work, because you can, and all day you are thinking about this slight and then adding it to the previous slights you cannot let go of and without being able to put your finger on when it happens,

life begins to drain out of the marriage. No big deal. No HUGE sin. Still, before you know it, you are far afield from the love for which you were made. Dead through your trespasses.

Which reminds us that this human condition of emptiness and failure toward someone, or something, outside of ourselves, infects a family, a community, a nation. You reconcile yourself to the seemingly small slips of civility, of graciousness, of charity, of empathy in you and between you; and, before you know it, there are gaping chasms of distrust or indifference where once a community flourished. “It seems to me something has passed out of the culture,” Marilynne Robinson wrote two decades ago, “changing it invisibly and absolutely. Suddenly it seems there are too few uses for words like...courage, dignity, and graciousness; learnedness, fairmindedness, openhandedness; loyalty, respect, and good faith. What bargain did we make? What could have appeared for a moment able to compensate for the loss of these things?” Dead through our trespasses...following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air.

Which further reminds us that our human condition, our emptiness and failure toward someone or something outside of ourselves is a failure toward the Lord and giver of life. Whether stealing from a pear tree or stewing over forgotten raisins in our oatmeal or missing Christ in the hungry we do not feed, our death in life is our failure toward the God. When and how did we begin to live at a distance from the source of life and love? You can say it is only ritual, but when the Sabbath no longer orders even the lives of those who say they believe, when the meaning of any given day eludes the community that has long since forgotten the story of God’s saving purposes, when the conversation that is prayer, the speaking with and listening for the love that is between us, stops, the human in us atrophies. Dead through our trespasses, following the desires of our flesh and senses, by nature children of wrath like everyone else.

Can God, even God, treat a patient with this condition? But God who is rich in mercy, we read, out of the great love with which God loved us, *even when we were dead through our trespasses*, made us alive together with Christ. Or as John put it, God loved the world in this way, God gave his only begotten son that whoever believed in him (who ever lived in relation to him), would not perish but have life with God. This atoning is not our doing—it is God’s. In Christ, *God came to us* in the far country of our emptiness, *God assumed our human condition* so that it would no longer be ours but God’s, and in so doing, God in Christ atoned—is that the word? Using the obsolete meaning still, God reconciles us not to the human condition but to the love for which we were made.

The church has tried, for two thousand years, piling metaphor upon metaphor to describe how God has done this. Candidates for ministry have gone down to defeat in their attempts to explain how Christ’s death on the cross got us out of the mess we have gotten ourselves into. Still we are left to wonder: What earthly difference does a heavenly savior make to lives so thoroughly reconciled to their own emptiness and failure toward others and toward God? How exactly has God treated our human condition? At the heart of our being made alive together is our being forgiven by the God who is rich in mercy, by the very one who is the victim of our lovelessness. James Alison calls this “undergoing atonement,” and by that he means in Christ we are “constantly in the process of being approached by someone who is forgiving [us].” Citing our text in Ephesians, Alison asks us to imagine someone approaching us when we were dead through our trespasses, when we did not even realize there was a problem. (Anyone in a marriage recognizes this sort of obliviousness). The free unmerited space, given us when the one we have failed does not accuse but forgives, jump starts the heart that has grown accustomed to emptiness, prompts the realization, slow or sudden, “Oh! So that’s what I’ve been involved in.” Being loved in this way, our heart is broken...and enlarged. “That,” Alison says, “is what forgiveness is all about. It’s not, ‘I need to sort out this moral problem you have.’ It’s, ‘Unless I come towards you, and enable you to undergo a breaking of heart, you’re going to live in too small a universe.’” The crucified and risen Christ breaks and enlarges our hearts as his mercy, new every morning, reconciles us to his love.

But something also happens in the heart of God, Robert Jenson says. When the only begotten son cries out forsaken by God on the cross, “the story comes to a halt and it is unclear that it will resume.” The cross is the “event in God that settles what sort of God this God is over and against fallen creation...The Father can have his Son and us with him in the bargain, or he can abolish us and have no Son, for there is no Son but the one who said, ‘Father, forgive them.’” Through the death of his Son, God’s heart is broken and through Christ God atones, reconciles, makes room in the love that God is for us. Easter will be God’s earnest that not only when we were dead through our trespasses but when we are dead as a doornail, God will make us alive together in Christ. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Amen.