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Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. (Matthew 13:3-4, RSV)

And so it is that all God's creatures do what is natural for them. Grain sown along the path does not grow since the birds come and devour the seeds. There is no point in scolding the birds. They are hungry. They are simply doing what is natural for them.

⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, ⁶but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away.

Again, there is no need to criticize the rocky ground for failing to nourish the seed. Rocks just are not good at that sort of thing. Nor should we scold the thorns for choking the young sprouts. That's what thorns do. They are territorial. They push and pull and entwine and crowd out the good seed. They are not being wicked. They just do that naturally. It's in their nature.

The mother bear defends her cubs and the donkey can be hard to convince to move. It's not that they are mean or stubborn, but rather, they are doing what good bears and donkeys do. They are being true to their nature. We could preach to them for hundreds of years, but they would pay no mind. They don't care about preaching. Means nothing to them! They just go about their business.

Yes, all God's creatures do what is natural for them, and there is no point in complaining about what is simply natural.

But here is the interesting thing: To be a Christian is to receive a new nature and to be governed by new natural laws. It is a miracle, this receiving of an new nature. We might not get this new nature all at once, but we can surely commence the conversion.

What is our old nature like — the one prior to grace? Well, by and large, I am pretty proud of humanity. I know that we have our faults, yet look at all the art Michelangelo created, all the music Bach made, all the plays and sonnets Shakespeare wrote, all the science Newton and Einstein invented, all the novels Dostoyevsky crafted, all the cathedrals the medieval craftsmen constructed, and all the quiet deeds of kindness done by untold millions of folks day by day. Any lover of humanity can find countless reasons to be proud of our race.

Yet, for all that, none of us is quite as good as we ought to be. None of us is quite as lovely as we will be once we reach heaven and the Lord entirely sanctifies us. Each of us is held back from perfection, each of us falls short of the fullness of humanity our Maker intends for us. There *is* something in our nature about which to complain. No point in complaining about donkeys and bears, but yes, there is a point in complaining about humanity. We could be better. Do you not agree?

When I began this summertime preaching, I had not especially planned on preaching a series of sermons on St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Yet, the power of Romans has

captured many a preacher in bygone days, and I likewise find myself drawn to this Epistle.

Two weeks ago, we considered Paul's great declaration of Christian freedom and emancipation from bondage to sin. That was Romans Chapter Six.

Last week, we pondered the difficulty and even the anguish of the Christian path, including St. Paul's cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" That was Romans Chapter Seven.

This week we begin St. Paul's magnificent Romans Chapter Eight. Indeed, the next three weeks are devoted to this one chapter.

This morning, we begin Chapter Eight. A theme of this early part of the chapter is our natural helplessness. The apostle teaches two themes: First, apart from God's grace, we do not have much hope of breaking our natural self-centeredness. And second, but we *do* have God's grace and therefore we do have hope of improvement. My text, then, is the double-sided teaching of Romans 8:7-8:

⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit... (Romans 8:7-8, RSV)

Again, my chief teacher on this passage is Martin Luther, from his Lectures on Romans.

This text from Romans Chapter Eight about the mind "hostile to God" leads Luther to speak of what he calls our natural "curvedness," by which he means our natural inclination to turn everything toward ourselves, seeking always some good state of ourselves. Luther expresses things this way:

...Scripture...describes man as *so turned in on himself* that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and in all things seeks only himself. This curvedness is now *natural* for us, a natural wickedness and a natural sinfulness. Thus man has no help from his natural powers, but he needs the aid of some power *outside* of himself. This is love, without which he always sins against the Law.(my emphasis)

And so it is that, apart from God's grace, we human beings are like what the scientists call "black holes." Alas, we are the black holes of God's creation. As I understand it, a black hole is a region of space in which the gravitational field is so powerful that nothing, not even light, can escape its pull after having fallen past its event horizon. And so I imagine some meteor speeding merrily along its way, but watch out! it ventures too near the black hole, and the doggone black hole pulls it in and it cannot escape. Nothing escapes, not even light, which surely would love to be speeding on its way, but is prevented by the black hole.

So it is with us humans, apart from God's grace. We tend to measure everything in terms of its ability to benefit ourselves. We tend to bend everything toward ourselves, seeking what is in it for us. We make ourselves the measure of all things. Strangely, as St. Paul and Luther teach us, we are even tempted to bend the holy law of God toward ourselves and to use it like weapon, like a club, to try to conquer God. This is the

temptation known as “works righteousness,” according to which we obey God’s holy law not because we love the Lord, but because we are trying to wrestle salvation out of him.

Let me continue with Luther’s description of our natural inclination toward bending everything toward our own benefit:

This crookedness, this depravity, this iniquity is condemned over and over in Scripture under the name of fornication and idolatry, and it is, as we have said earlier in chapter 6, something most profound in our nature, indeed, it is our very nature itself, wounded and totally in ferment, so that without grace it becomes not only incurable but also totally unrecognizable.

So, that is the first theme — a discouraging theme: St. Paul teaches that if we do not watch out, we will curve the world to ourselves. That is simply our nature when our minds are set on the flesh rather than upon the Spirit. Thorns choke seedlings. It is natural for them. If we are not careful, we will just naturally make ourselves the measure of all things.

Now, let’s turn to the second theme — the happier theme. To be a human is to be capable of being inspired. There is no point in preaching to the bears and the donkeys, but there is a point in preaching to us! We can improve. Our natures can be uplifted. The Holy Spirit is not wasting his time to tug at our hearts. We can, bit by bit, acquire a new and better nature, such that we would not dream of doing the bad things we used to do so easily. I am speaking of a wonder — the wonder of a sanctified life.

The great thing about the Gospel is that if we set our minds on it, it straightens us out, it corrects our curvedness, makes us holy people on earth, and permits us to love God and not just ourselves. Luther puts the point this way:

For grace has set before itself no other object than God toward which it is carried and toward which it is moving; it sees only Him, it seeks only Him, and it always moves toward Him, and all other things which it sees between itself and God it passes by as if it had not seen them and directs itself only toward God. This is the “upright heart” (Ps. 7:10) and the “right spirit” (Ps. 51:10).

Our task is to get from the one state to the other, from our natural curvedness to love of God. Ahh! But how to get over our eternal self-centeredness, this crookedness?

For Luther, the way forward is life in Christ. Luther points out that apart from Christ, we are beset by fear. We fear that we are not getting enough of the good things in life, we fear that our threescore and ten years is not going to be enough, that we will have lived in vain. Luther says that Jesus himself knew that fear and conquered it for us:

No one has conquered this fear except Christ alone, who has overcome all temporal evils and even eternal death. Therefore those who believe in Him no longer have any reason at all to be afraid, but with a blessed pride they laugh and rejoice in all these evils, for they are not going to perish or be swallowed up, but they are going to experience, await, and see the victory of Christ made complete in those evils. And thus they say: “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

Like the tugboat captain who knows well the harbor, with its currents and challenges, so is Jesus the captain of our souls. If we will hitch our ship to him, he will guide us into a sanctified life and into a new nature.

You might have seen in our worship folder recently the news that Virginia Ressmeyer has recently died. She was the wife of Bishop Rudolph Ressmeyer and a friend of our congregation. Chris Schulze, our dear Sexton, told me that Mrs. Ressmeyer was the most prayerful person he ever knew.

Chris brought me back a copy of Virginia's funeral bulletin, which pleased me very much. Virginia did what you might want to consider doing too: She told her pastor in advance the hymns she wanted at her funeral. She wanted twelve of them! And the liturgy came close to that, with nine.

Many of those hymns were hymns I also want at my funeral, including the great evening hymn *Abide with Me*. I mention this because the final verse of that hymn contains a phrase describing the new nature available to you and to me: a nature that is no longer curved inward so much, but is rather pointed straight toward God. That verse goes this way:

- 5 Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes,
shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies;
heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.
(*Abide with Me*, LBW 272. Text: Henry F. Lyte, 1793-1847)

How good it would be if we were like that more often: people of prayer and meditation upon the Gospel so that we become pointed "to the skies," straight as an arrow, directed toward Jesus. Then our natural crookedness would be healed, to the benefit of our neighbors and ourselves, and to credit of Jesus, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.