

I was on an airplane for the first time since this pandemic began. The flight attendant was giving her 'in-flight safety lecture,' and obviously trying to help us pay attention, and she got mine! This is what I heard:

--There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only four ways out of this airplane.

--Your seat cushion can be used for flotation, and in the event of an emergency water landing, please take them with our compliments.

--Smoking in the lavatories is prohibited. Any person caught smoking in the lavatories will be asked to leave the plane immediately.

--Thank you for flying AMERICAN AIRLINES. We hope you enjoyed giving us the business as much as we enjoyed taking you for a ride.

--As you exit the plane, please make sure to gather all of your belongings. Anything left behind will be distributed evenly among the flight attendants. Please do not leave children or spouses.

OK, I'm shifting gears a bit this weekend. I'm going to zero in on this fabulous passage of St. Paul from his letter to the Romans. Now repeat this after me: *Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, Our Lord. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.* Memorize it – and you can push the snooze button for the next 15 minutes. You don't need a homily if you can commit Romans 8:39 to memory and BELIEVE it.

BUT, you pay me these big bucks.....SO – I just happen to have a few teensy little comments to add. Hey – life's tough – why should you expect church to be any different?!

When I was a much younger pastor, when the dinosaurs still roamed the land, a young man came to me for confession. It was a difficult confession for him. He had been having an affair with a girl and she had become pregnant. For a number of reasons, marriage was out of the question. The pregnancy would, irrevocably, disrupt both their lives, not to mention the life of the child who would be born. They were adamant about not choosing abortion.

Being a sensitive person, he needed no lecture about being irresponsible. He made no attempt to rationalize, offer excuses or blame, and in that sense, he was inspiring to work with. He recognized that he had sinned.

He also recognized that he had helped create a situation that was unchangeable, a certain ease and innocence had been lost, and some things in life would never again be the same.

He ended by saying words of such sadness and hopelessness that I have never forgotten them: "There is no way I'll ever live normally again, beyond this. Even God can't unscramble an egg!"

What this young man was saying was that, for him, there would always be a skeleton in the closet. Ordinary life would, in its own way, limp along but he would remain forever marked by this mistake. I gave him today's passage for his penance. Repeat with me: *Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, our Lord.*

Today we live in a world -- and too often a church -- in which this kind of brokenness and attitude about everything being over are becoming more the rule than the exception. For more and more people there is a major something to live beyond, some skeleton in the closet: a broken marriage, an abortion, a religious commitment that did not work out, a pregnancy outside marriage, a betrayed trust, a broken relationship, a soured affair, a serious mistake, a searing regret; sometimes accompanied by a sense of sin, sometimes without it.

Sadly for many, this comes, as it did for that young man, coupled with a hopelessness, a sense that something irrevocable has happened. We need to remember the words of St. Paul. Repeat with me: *Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

What we need today in the church, perhaps more than anything else, is a theology of brokenness which relates failure and sin seriously enough to redemption and the power of the cross. Too often what is taught as redemption is little more than the strict law of karma: one chance per lifetime, salvation through getting it right, happiness and innocence only when there is nothing to be forgiven. Which completely ignores the stories of Peter, who denied Jesus, Paul, who was a murderer, all of the apostles fleeing Jesus at His trial, and countless now canonized saints down through the centuries. WHY DO WE FORGET THESE STORIES WHEN WE ARE IN DIFFICULTY? THEY ARE IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER BECAUSE THEY GIVE US A SENSE OF HOPE!

Partly it is because we have too much fear of God. Ultimately we look at the scrambled egg of our lives, at our mistakes and sins, and believe that the loss of a certain grace is unchangeable, that a mistake hangs us forever. We just do not believe that there is a second chance, let alone 77 times 7 chances, that can be just as lifegiving as the first.

Those of you are at least as old as I am, were pretty much raised in a Catholicism which had a deep sense of morality. It took commitment seriously and called a sin a sin. It was, on most moral issues, brutally uncompromising. It asked you not to betray, not to sin, not to make mistakes. I have no regrets about this. In fact I feel a sense of loss for many today who are being raised in a moral relativism which excuses too much and challenges too little. It's why so many people are perpetual adolescents, blaming everyone else if they don't get their way or if life goes astray. We even have a word now coined for this reality of our culture -- victim culture. If something goes wrong in our lives, we think someone should have to pay for it, whether it's my fault or not.

However, if the Catholicism of that time had a fault -- and it did -- it was precisely that it did not allow for mistakes. It demanded that you get it right the first time. There was supposed to be no need for a second chance. If you made a mistake, you lived with it and, like the rich young man of the gospel, were doomed to be sad for the rest of your life. A serious mistake was a permanent stigmatization, a mark that you wore like Cain or Hester Prynne's scarlet letter.

I have seen that mark in all kinds of people: divorcees, ex-priests or ex-religious, people who have had abortions, married people who have had affairs, people who have had children outside marriage, parents who have made serious mistakes with their children, people who have suffered physical tragedies and losses, and countless others who have made serious mistakes.

There is too little around to help them. And church people have often made things worse by condemning them. We need a theology of brokenness. We need to remember St. Paul. Repeat with me: *Nothing can separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus, Our Lord.*

We need a theology that challenges us not to make mistakes, that takes sin seriously, but which tells us that when we sin, when we make mistakes, when life seems to fail us – or we fail it – that we are given the chance to take our place among the broken, among those whose lives are not perfect, the loved sinners, those for whom Jesus Christ came.

We need a theology which tells us that a second, third, fourth and fifth chance are just as valid as the first one.

We need a theology that tells us that mistakes are not forever, that they are not even for a lifetime, that time and grace wash clean, that nothing is irrevocable in the mercy and love of God.

Finally, we need a theology which teaches us that God loves us as sinners and that the task of Catholic Christianity is not to teach us how to live, but to teach us how to live again, and again, and again. (Adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, FORGOTTEN AMONG THE LILIES, p. 143-145)

A story to conclude.

Physician Rachel Naomi Remen tells of a young man who suffered a terrible loss. He had bone cancer, and his leg was removed at the hip to save his life. She writes:

He was 24 years old when I started working with him and he was a very angry young man with a lot of bitterness. He felt a deep sense of injustice and a very deep hatred for all people because it seemed so unfair to him that he had suffered this terrible loss so early in life.

I worked with him through his grief and rage and pain using painting, imagery, and deep psychotherapy. After working with him for more than 2 years there came a profound shift. He began coming out of himself. Later, he started to visit other people who had suffered severe physical losses and he would tell me the most wonderful stories about those visits.

Once he visited a young woman who was almost his own age. It was a hot day in Palo Alto and he was in running shorts so his artificial leg showed when he came into her hospital room. The woman was so depressed about the loss of both her breasts that she wouldn't even look at him, wouldn't pay attention to him. The nurses had left her radio playing, probably in an effort to cheer her up. So, desperate to get her attention, he unstrapped his leg and began dancing around the room on one leg, snapping his fingers to the music. She looked at him in amazement and then burst out laughing and said, "Man, if you can dance, I can sing."

It was a year following this that we sat down to review our work together. He talked about what was significant to him and then I shared what was significant in our process. As we were reviewing our 2 years of work together, I opened his file and there discovered several drawings he had made early on. I handed them to him. He looked at them and said, 'Oh, look at this.' He showed me one of his earliest drawings. I had suggested to him then that he draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase and running through the vase was a deep black crack. This was the image of his body, and he had taken a black crayon, and drawn the crack over and over again. He was grinding his teeth with rage at the time. It was very, very painful because it seemed to him that this vase could never function as a vase again. It could never hold water.

Now, several years later, he came to this picture and looked at it and said, "Oh, this one isn't finished." And I said, extending the box of crayons, "Why don't you finish it?" He picked up a yellow crayon, and putting

his finger on the crack, he said, 'You see – here – where it is broken – this is where the light comes through.' And with the yellow crayon he drew light streaming through the crack of his body. (Remen, KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM, p. 175-176)

Our pain, our hurt, our sin, our brokenness, our failures, can be instruments of change for us – for better or for worse. A lot depends on how sound is our theology – our God-view of our world. St. Paul had it right. Repeat with me: *Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord.* AMEN.

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