

Me and my shadow

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

4th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6, Year A. June 12, 2005. (Text: Romans 5:6-11.)

God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

A couple of weeks ago we went to see the new movie, *Crash*, at the Isis. Maybe some of you have seen it. If you haven't, you should. But now it's only on down in Carbondale at the Crystal. I'm not about to give a movie review, but this film about racial and ethnic conflict demonstrates one significant truth about human beings: the best of us always have a dark side, and the worst of us have at least a glimmer of light in us.

"So," you might say, "We already knew that." And you probably already know this, too: that our ability to get beyond our personal darkness (our *shadow* as the psychologists call it) —the ability to transcend it rather than be destroyed by it— depends entirely on our willingness to confront it. But often we refuse to do that. Lots of us live year after year – well into maturity – denying that we *have* a shadow side at all. We simply won't look at it. The "shadow" is a potent metaphor, because everyone who stands in sunlight casts a shadow. And anyone who ventures into that light (which is, of course, another metaphor) can see his shadow, if he has the courage to look. This is a subject of both Greek and Shakespearean tragedies. It's a standard theme because it's a universal truth. You and I are dealing with it today, each in our own personal way.

My shadow is not an illusion. It's real. So is yours. The darkness in us is not simply a matter of misperception. A biblical rather than psychological way of putting it is to say that we all must contend with the reality of *sin* in our life. The Bible says that "God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all." We've known people whose lives seem to be "all sunshine," haven't we? They appear "golden." Everything always goes their way; they never have a bad day; they come out of every situation looking good. —Well, let me tell you, even these "golden people" struggle in secret with their own personal blends of sin, guilt, failure, and self-rejection. There's darkness there, too, under the gold —though it may be well hidden.

Today we heard a few key verses from Paul's Letter to the Romans. I haven't run into very many people who feel much fondness for old Paul, but I like him. I have an icon of Paul hanging on the wall beside my desk. It's a pity more people don't have warmer feelings for him, because I think Paul is somebody any Christian can identify with, if we just get to know him through reading and re-reading his letters. We call him "Saint" Paul, but he's not wearing a halo. He's a very normal human being: imperfect, impulsive, hot-tempered, and vain —but at the same time dedicated, selfless, compassionate, and tender-hearted. Read Galatians or Romans and you see a man who's obviously wrestling with his shadow. In other letters he alternates between being embarrassingly arrogant and self-deprecatingly humble. He's so brilliant his intellect sometimes carries him beyond our comprehension. We just don't get what he's driving at. At other times he can be as direct, full of feeling, and "down-home" in his language as my dear old East Texas grandma used to be.

The key insight into Paul – the one that can unlock the power of his letters – is that he had been bowled over by the unimaginable grace God had shown him, personally. And I mean *grace* in the theological sense: "unmerited favor." Paul, then known only as Saul, had been a dedicated young persecutor of Christians. He was building himself a career as an agent of the High Priest, seeking out disciples of the crucified Messiah and dragging them off to prison, when suddenly and without any preliminaries at all Jesus himself confronted him on a Syrian road in a blinding noonday light. Instead of thundering in a terrifying voice, saying "Leave my people alone, or your doom is sealed," Jesus called Paul to be his own special ambassador. His conversion experience was so vivid, and his amazement at being chosen as a witness for Jesus, despite his own personal evil, was so great that it shaped his message – his "gospel" – for the rest of his life. Paul was a "new man" after the Damascus Road event, but he always had to struggle with his shadows: the constant need to prove himself, recurrent bouts of legalism, and occasional displays of self-righteousness. You can find all this in his letters.

Romans is Paul's self-introduction to a little community of disciples who had never met him. The letter was sent on ahead of him by a messenger in order to give the Christians in Rome a sense of who Paul was and what he stood for before he arrived there for a visit. In the part of Romans we heard this morning, he tells how Christ made it possible for him to face his own shadow —which he goes on to describe later in these agonized words,

where he tells how, although he is trying hard to do good things, his personal weaknesses keep causing him to fail. He writes,

“I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t do it. I *decide* to do good, but I don’t really *do* it; I decide *not* to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? —Isn’t that the real question?— The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.”

Maybe I like Paul because I can hear myself in his words. I was brought up in a Bible-centered Calvinist household and spent much of my life – starting in childhood – trying hard always to “do the right thing,” “obey the Law,” and “keep all the rules.” I was a kind of Christian Pharisee. And sometimes those old reflexes kick in, even now. When that happens, I feel like I ought to have been a “hero for Jesus” —but I haven’t been, and I’m not, and so I figure I’ve somehow “let God down.” I’ve failed him. When I start thinking like that it’s clear that what I want is to *deserve* God’s favor and achieve some imaginary “spiritual success” through my own efforts or virtue. Pride is what that’s called, and vanity. Then I get over it, and I’m ashamed of myself, and I try to get back on track. —Let me assure you, if you stand in the pulpit and presume to preach the gospel to other people, you put yourself squarely in the brightest light that shines – the light of God’s Son – and that brilliance makes your shadow so dark you can’t miss it.

The comfort for me, and I pray the comfort for you too, as we face our own sin, our personal shadows – whether they’re pride, or vanity, or greed, or anger or something else – is expressed perfectly in the words of Paul we heard this morning: *While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.*

Accepting these words of Paul as insight into the work of Christ, not just for Paul but *for me*, is what brings me back to my senses again and again. I’m a “mixed creature,” just like the characters in the movie *Crash*. I have some good qualities, sure, but I also cast a dark shadow. I’m not golden. I’m weak, not strong. If my salvation depends entirely on my virtues and “spiritual successes,” I’m in serious trouble. But the Son of God gave himself for me...and for every single soul that ever *has* lived and ever *will* live. —That’s *grace!* The Son of God loved us in advance of our birth. His love was not, is not, and never will be conditioned on our being “spiritual heroes” or “good people” or even on our “being sorry for our sins.” In his ministry among ordinary mortals in Judea and Galilee, Jesus made friends with *unrepentant* sinners. He did good to them. He healed them. He had supper with them and laughed at their jokes. He didn’t hold himself aloof until they “got religion,” or made a perfect act of contrition, or answered an altar call. *While we still were sinners, Christ died for us.* All we have to do is believe this and behave as if it’s the truth. Because it is.

What a relief! What a joy! Still casting our long shadows, we are already reconciled to the God who is pure light, in whom there is no darkness at all. And this blissful end to the separation from God that comes from our ego-bound willfulness is accomplished entirely from God’s side, not from ours. Efforts at earning God’s favor can’t succeed. But we’ve been given that favor as a love-gift. *God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.* Deliverance from the destructive power of our own personal darkness has been worked in gentleness and love by the costly sacrifice of God who was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.

Ponder the power of what we’re about to *do* in our worship this morning. Don’t let the significance of these acts be lost because they’re so familiar. The Peace of Christ we’ll exchange in a few minutes is a simple reminder that we’ve been reconciled to God and each other through his Son. The body of Christ and the blood of Christ which we’ll share after that is a constant assurance that we “mixed creatures” —full of aspirations to goodness but equally aware of our own darkness— have been accepted into the Eternal Light.