

*What I Did On My Week of Continuing Education*

She was asleep. And dreaming. It was the recurring dream she seemed to have a variation of every night. Something very important, the most important thing in the world, was within her grasp. Sometimes it was a laptop case. Other times it was a piece of paper with cryptic writing on it. Or it could be an amorphous something, anything almost, without any real shape or form, but it was there. It had the power to set everything right. It was hers for the taking. Yet somehow, every night, it disappeared. Somehow it slipped right through her fingers. A hesitation, an interruption, and it was gone.

She awoke. It was cold. Immediately the memories of the night previous flooded her mind. The anger. The hurt. The guilt. How could she go on? How could she face another day? “It cannot happen again.” she resolved. “It must not happen again. O God, please don’t let it happen again.” Then new thoughts, physical sensations, gained priority in her head. “I must have a parasite inside me. My blood is poisoned. A tumor has to be growing somewhere.”

Mechanically, unthinkingly, held together only by “habit and skin,” she got out of bed, readied herself, and went to work. Friends and co-workers calling “Good Morning,” brought her no comfort. “Surely they must know. It must be all over my face. The stench of it clings to me and cannot be washed off. Why won’t anyone acknowledge the obvious? So this is what it means to ‘shoulder the burden of shame.’”

At lunchtime she went for a walk. The sunshine felt good. Perhaps no one knew after all. Maybe it never really happened, not even once, not all those times. And no one would ever need know that it did happen, especially if it never happened again. And it would never happen again, she was sure of that. She could summon the strength from deep

within herself to prevent another episode. She thought of happier times. A childhood swing set at grandma's house and an understanding grandma who seemed to appreciate her much more than her parents ever did.

But that evening, darkness fell, and she found her feet walking to a place she really didn't want to go. She spoke words she didn't want to say. She did the very thing she did not want to do. But it was as if it was not she. It was if as there was someone else controlling her thoughts and movements, and she was a bystander merely watching an accident she could not prevent. It was like being a theatergoer watching someone else portray her, badly, on stage. If not "possession," at least "oppression." Then it was back home, back to sleep, back to dreams. And eventually, back to recurring reality in the morning light.

"What is it?" you ask. Her problem. Her guilt. Her sin. What is ours? Our compulsion. Our shame. The sin that haunts us in the night. We could go to the list of the Seven Deadly Sins: wrath, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, and gluttony. But that's preachers' talk. Too churchy. Try it this way. She walks to a buffet. While millions of people around the world are starving, she gorges herself on shrimp and cheesecake. Then goes somewhere private to wretch it all up, to keep the figure the magazines tell her she must have.

Maybe it's a nursing home she's walking to, to see her aged, failing mother. Just a few more things to say, just a few more lies to tell, and Mother will sign the papers. The house, the insurance, the bank accounts, it will all be hers. And just to punish her for all her neglect in the past, she moves her hearing aids, drops her reading glasses, and forgets to bring her medication.

Or, she goes to a bar. Maybe a dancer. You know what kind of bar. You know what kind of dancer. It's the only extra job she could get that will pay the rent. Or at the bar she sees the man who gives her the attention and affection her husband will not. Or at the bar her

only interest is in the bartender, who, although she is a VIP, “visibly intoxicated person,” he will continue to medicate her with liquor to kill the pain of her tortured soul.

Could it be a meeting she’s going to. A secret society. A coven. A command performance at her satanic majesty’s request. The local school of witchcraft and wizardry. Harmless? Renouncing her baptism? Denying that Jesus is Lord? Rejecting the love of God? Participating in dark rituals, occult sacrifices, black masses? Things that would make Allister Crowley blush? No, not harmless. Soul destroying, yes. Harmless, no.

St. Paul knew about this kind of stuff. He knew the connection between sin and suffering, that one leads to the other, sometime generally, sometime specifically, for all humanity from Adam onward, and in the individual as well. He had his own problems. He had a past he could have been ashamed of. Persecutor of the church. Hunting down Christians and bringing them to Jerusalem in chains for trial. And then there was that thorn in Paul’s flesh. What was it? We don’t know. Physical? Emotional? Theological? Nobody knows. Paul never told us. Lots of people guess, but guesses are all they are.

Whether Paul is referring to his particular thorn here or not, I don’t know, but Paul had a keen sense of a sin or sins he could not control. He wrote, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Well, we’ve all been there. It’s best we don’t know the exact nature of Paul’s thorn, his recurring sin. That way each of us can read our own problem, our own sin, our own sickness into Paul’s letters, and find release, as he found release. In Jesus Christ. In the sufferings and victory of Jesus Christ.

Jesus suffered. Do we forget that Jesus suffered? If he was true God and true man, then he felt every temptation we feel: temptations to lust, wrath, envy. He felt all the physical things we feel: hunger, thirst, exhaustion. But he did not sin. We sin, but Jesus did not,

even though he suffered. He suffered while fasting in the wilderness. He suffered on the cross. He suffered every time someone else sinned or was sinned against. He felt pain but did not sin.

So we can't blame God for our sin. We can't say, "God made everything, including my sin." We can't say, "God, walk a mile in my moccasins and you'd sin too." God already walked in your sandals, and he didn't. Because Jesus didn't sin, he could be our Savior. Only he could take all our sins upon himself and die in our place. He suffered for us. But we go on suffering in this world too? Why?

"Why?" is not an easy question to answer. God rarely tells us the "Why?" behind anything. We can get ourselves into big trouble trying to answer "Why?" where God gives us no clues. Maybe our job isn't so much to speculate "Why?" as it is to proclaim what is. To proclaim what God has revealed.

Paul wrote: "We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." Paul didn't write: The sufferings of this present time are not real. He didn't write: The sufferings of this present time are miniscule. He didn't write that these sufferings don't matter, shouldn't hurt, ought to be ignored or anything like that. He said these thorns in our flesh are minor compared to the joy God has in store for us. That's a life-changing proclamation. That's gospel. That's a holy promise. Hallelujah! And with that Joy before us, we can endure today. We can, by God's grace, overcome those temptations that hound us. We can live free because Jesus forgives our sins and makes his home in our heart.

Evening came again. She did not go where she didn't want to go, she did not say the things she did not want to say, or do the things she did not want to do. She could have,

there was a part of her that wanted to, but she didn't have too. Suddenly what she had done before seemed so distasteful. There is a better way. She knows that now. There was a new presence inside her. A holy presence, not coming from within but coming from without, taking residence, "tabernacling" in her soul. Not everything was perfect, mind you, but there was a warmth, a health, a release, a feeling of hopefulness, that had been noticeably absent before. This is the presence of Christ, of God's Holy Spirit.

I am not the man I was. I am not yet the man I will, by God's grace, someday be. God is not finished with me yet. My hope is not to be myself, but to die to myself so that Christ can live in me. You too? When Judgment Day comes we all be gathered into Christ's eternal kingdom. Amen.