

**Sermon: The League of the Baptized**

**Scripture: Matthew 5:38-6:4**

**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**

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It all begins with water, the ritualistic way that the Christian life begins is the same way life begins, with water, the water of the womb and then the water of the font. As soon as the gift of life is given with grace we get right down to business and say “let’s wash them for the forgiveness of their sins!” The doctrine of original sin has fallen into disfavor of late and that’s probably ok cause it’s kind of a crummy thing for us to be saying that these babes enter the world corrupted by sin and are immediately in need of saving. And yet there does seem to be some truth there that’s worth studying and asking why do we in the church so often begin with sin? What? No grin playing above that chin? Looks more like chagrin as I go to talk about sin.

He’s not exactly Dr. Suess, but I’m not sure I’ve ever read a theology book that’s made me laugh before, like when I read this summer a book by an English author writer named Francis Spufford. I’ve never read a theology book that uses the F word like he does and while it made me laugh out loud at times, it’s also makes a profound case for Christianity, it’s an apologetic and it’s called “Unapologetic: Why Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense.” In it he begins with sin and refers to what he calls the Human Propensity to F\*\*\*\* things up. Although he uses the real word and it does anchor his point in pretty a strong way. Within the second chapter he concedes though and say Ok, maybe I’ll start referring to this as the HPTFTU. And this is what he

says about the HPTFTU - “when we speak of sin, we are not just talking about our tendency to lurch and stumble and screw up by accident but our active inclination to break stuff, stuff here meaning moods, promises, relationships we care about and our own and others well-being.” He asks “Can’t we say that in the end almost everyone recognizes this as one of the truths about themselves?”

The HPTFTU. That’s the problem and that’s where we start. And sitting right there smack in the middle of our entire religious tradition is the great symbol of the HPTFTU which is what? That’s right, the cross. The symbol that says we humans can mess things up so royally that we beat up and execute the generous and loving creator of the world, seeing him as a threat to us. That’s the HPTFTU at work. But it’s also there of course in a ton of smaller ways in our everyday lives, isn’t it when we lie or cheat to get what we want or avoid what we don’t want. Or when we bond with one another by talking mean about someone else. Or when we lash out unfairly at someone we love most because they have pushed our sensitive button. Or when we of wealth in this country and world benefit daily off of systems that exploit others. And so on and so forth ad nauseum. It’s just all the same penchant - whether in dramatic and mundane form - of the HPTFTU, our very human inclination to break stuff.

It’s interesting because Spufford in his book writes about how Christianity differs in its response to the HPTFTU than our monotheistic cousins do, Judaism and Islam. They are people of the book, God’s revelation comes to them by way of a book and in that book, the Torah and the Quran, there are a ton of rules, regulations and laws for governing good and right behavior that then counters the HPTFTU while, Christianity, oddly enough, does something different. Here I’ll quote him at length cause it’s worth hearing how he says it himself:

Christianity...makes frankly impossible demands. Instead of asking for specific actions, it offers general but lunatic principles. It thinks you should give your possessions away, refuse to defend yourself, love strangers and even enemies as much as your family, behave as if there's no tomorrow. These principles do not amount to a sustainable program. They deliberately ignore the question of how they could possibly be maintained... And that's not all. Christianity also makes what you MEAN by your behavior all-important. You could pauperize yourself, get slapped silly without fighting back, care for lepers and laugh all day long in the face of future markets and it still wouldn't count if you did it for the wrong reasons. Not only is Christianity insanely perfectionistic in its few positive recommendations, it's also insanely perfectionistic about motive. It won't accept generosity performed for the sake of self-interest as generosity. It says unless altruism is altruism all the way down, it doesn't count as altruism at all. So far, so thrillingly impractical. But now notice the consequence of having an ideal of behavior not sized for human lives: everyone fails. Really. Everyone.

Judaism and Islam on the other hand, with their set of sustainable rules for behavior, offer laws like a wearable coat, a coat that everyone can put on if they are willing to make the effort. And what that does is that it creates a judged picture of the world, a moralized landscape through the laws and regulations in which good people can be told from bad people, in which all human actions can be split into two categories, pure and impure, clean and dirty, permitted and forbidden. But with Christianity you have all these perfectionist ideals – forgive your enemy, gouge your eye out if it causes you to sin, sell all your possessions, to even have lust in your heart is to commit adultery – that's a doozy - and so one and so forth. So much of Jesus' sermon on the mount have these proclamations that the listener is basically driven to throw up their hands at the stringency of it all... and that seems to be exactly

the point, everyone fails because the HPTFTU is baked right into everyone of us as humans.

There's a beautiful honesty in that isn't there? It's just plain true, isn't it? When you get beyond the hypocritical preacher man standing behind the pulpit and saying "you are all sinners and bound to punishment unless you change your ways or accept Jesus or are more faithful..." but when you just hear it as this honest humble acknowledgement that we all fall down, that none of us measure up to the ideal of who we would like to be and know we could be, that all of us have an inclination to break things we don't want broken, it's just honest.

And so now imagine forming a club or a group with that honesty as the starting point – not we joined because we are great but we joined because we're not so great and want to be better! That kind of honesty and humility where we are sinners who have this strange tendency to mess things up that we'd really rather not mess up and that's how we're bound together, how we're driven together.

For one thing it drives us out of our individual obsession with being perfect and best and drives us together into a community of the imperfect and even the worst, ideally a community, as a result, of gentleness and understanding and mutual support – oh, I know you messed up again. Same. It's to be expected. God expects it and actually prepared for it by stepping right into our messes and bearing the brunt of them and then went on ahead and forgave us ahead of time. So as one of members of the league of the guilty and forgiven how can I do anything but forgive you? As one who much patience has been shown in the ways I can break things, how can I do

anything but be patient with you. As someone who is loved despite his ego screaming me, me, me, to the exclusion of others, I can make room for your over active ego as well.

I know in this league of the guilty and forgiven it doesn't always work like that, of course it doesn't, cause the HPTFTU is as real and at work in this league and this place as it is anywhere else, we're just supposed to be better at forgiving. It was God's grand plan, God's rescue mission for the tough state of the human race, to draw together a community of the forgiven to be people of forgiveness.

Do you think it worked? I wonder if at times God scratches God's head and says "In theory this really made a lot of sense" but the followers of my son can be pretty darn judgmental and not all that forgiving and as power hungry as anyone. Hmmm?

There is one organization out there though that I think captures the Spirit of all this and maybe lives out the rescue plan better than most Christians and churches around and that is AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, those people who come together to be with one another based upon the common denominator of their addiction, their powerlessness, their colorful experiences that they freely shared with one another of their HPTFTU. The disease of addiction has a special way of messing things up interiorly and in ever widening circles and as the Big Book makes really really clear, the way out, the way towards healing is not through will power and strength and grit and brawniness but by letting go and letting Your Higher Power save you. Anyone who is in AA or has a family member in there knows that very well.

And that's exactly the idea for how we welcome you into the church, not with ascent but with descent, not with upward mobility but downward mobility. I know I've said this to you many times, but the best image for what we are doing at baptism is to watch the Baptists do it. I'm sure my Baptist preacher father is smiling out there watching the live stream too! But the full immersion, the dunking of the entire person into the water and allowing the water to close over their heads as though they are in a grave. So I'm talking serious downward mobility is the way into the church! Sinner, dunk! Guilty, dunk! Dead in your sins, dunk! But you don't hold them under there do you? They're limp and you raise them up and out of the water of that tomb and pronounce them forgiven and welcome to the league of the baptized where we are gathering as the guilty and forgiven... who will be guilty again, the broken and the healed, who will be broken again, who, because of their honesty can't help but be gentle on everyone else around them who are in the same condition they are.

May it be so that our baptisms will expand our hearts for the love that God so unrealistically offers us and asks of us. Amen.