

Arsonists at play: Church burnings in Alabama

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

The reign of terror against rural Alabama churches appears to be over. Three college men—all honor students, and two of them students at a United Methodist school, Birmingham-Southern College—have confessed to setting nine churches on fire.

In the days following the arrests, Alabamians asked, “Why?” We have heard no motive other than “for the thrill of it.” I remember a federal agent who, in the days after the first fires, speculated on possible motives and said, “Maybe somebody just did it for the thrill of watching something burn.” At the time it struck me as the silliest of possible explanations. Yet that appears to be it. Investigators found on one of the men’s blog a comment about not liking Christians, but nothing else that was illuminating. It looks like they did it for the hell of it.

Years ago I heard a scholar offer various images of humanity. *Homo fabricator*, the human as the one who creates, was one; another was *homo ludens*, the human as the one who plays. Still another was the human as the vandal. For those with a nihilistic worldview, for whom nothing means more than anything else and nothing is worth doing, there is no better joy than tearing something apart, defacing a wall, ripping off something in which someone else finds joy. If we can’t have the world we think we deserve, and if we lack the creativity and courage to work on a new one, then tear the hell out of the world we’ve got. The vandal rules.

Flannery O’Connor’s story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” includes a nihilistic character, “the misfit,” who complains that Jesus has “thrown everything off balance. ” But he says that if Jesus’ resurrection is a lie, then “it’s nothing for you to do now but to enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”

When I first read Augustine’s *Confessions* in college, I thought the saint was making too much of sin, particularly his sin. He had exercised his youthful lust and fathered

a child out of wedlock. Still, as I turned the pages I expected to read a revelation of some greater sin. When Augustine finally got to his great sin, his monumental rebellion against God, it was—the youthful theft of a few pears. That’s it?

Augustine notes that he didn’t really need the pears. He had the money to buy food if he had been hungry. He and his friends stole the pears for no better reason than the thrill of it. For Augustine, that seems to be as low as sin takes us. There is something almost ennobling about the sins of pride, of human arrogance, sins that are the dark side of our creativity and ingenuity. And there is something rather charming about the sins of the flesh, the lusty little sins that we produce because we are creatures rather than creators.

The most accusing and frightening of our sins are those we commit for no reason but the thrill of it, out of the perverse joy of destruction—the momentary rush during the pointless, meaningless act, the pleasure of watching something burn. Those are the sins that take us to the depths of hell.

I once heard an interview with a writer of horror stories. He was asked, “Why are your stories so violent and bloody?” He replied simply, “Because we are that way. We prefer havoc but rarely have the guts to do it.”

As we walk with Jesus toward the cross in these days of Lent, I know all the official reasons why Jesus was tortured to death—he was a threat to the Roman rulers, he was feared by the religious authorities, he was caught up in the hands of a frenzied mob. But it’s likely that at the foot of the cross that day were also those who merely took delight in the show, who wanted to see Jesus die just for the hell of it. For me that gives a context for Jesus’ words from the cross: “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.”