

The gospel vs. self-reliance

This week the lectionary offers foundational verses of our faith. But the faith cannot live on a couple verses alone.

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Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus and Jesus on a Rooftop*, oil on canvas, 1899.

Both the gospel and the epistle for this week include passages that are almost annoyingly familiar. There's John 3:16, memory verse par excellence, and Ephesians 2:8-9, the battle cry of the Reformation:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.

These are foundational verses of our faith, but the faith cannot live on a couple verses alone—so we should maybe dig a bit deeper this week.

Since we're in Lent, I'm wondering about the writer's mention of "death" in Ephesians. Could it mean that we were dead through our self-centered relationships, through resenting our ex-girlfriends or through bowing to the rulers of the airwaves? We were dead through self-loathing and overeating and driving a Hummer and pretty much fill-in-the-blank?

The sentence really could end with, "you were dead through sin." We were dead through sin, curved in on ourselves—our desires, our needs, our pocketbooks, our own well-being—and thus unable to be turned to God. In this convex posture, we foolishly (albeit predictably) trust ourselves rather than God, and so can't hear the beautiful, crazy "yes" of God.

We don't trust that we really are what God has made us, because we are "self-made" people—autonomous, independent, self-reliant. We don't really *need* God, except maybe when we're desperate or in the midst of personal tragedy. Then we rub the bottle for our magic-genie God.

If we think of the biblical text as simply a story of who God is and who we are, then this plot line of turning in on self—of human sin and lacking trust in God—is our dominant character arc. God's character arc is to seek relationship, to always come down to us. But we say, "No thanks, we've got it covered." This is one way to see original sin: our unwillingness to let God be God.

I hostess a monthly "theology pub" in downtown Denver, an open conversation covering a variety of topics. "Gee, Nadia," someone said recently, "for a Christian progressive you sure do end up making every theology pub, no matter what the topic, be about sin."

Yes, sin is one of my favorite subjects. But as I reread the Ephesians text, instead of seeing how wicked and sinful we are, this time I'm seeing these words: "rich in mercy," "great love," "immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us."

I also see the word "gift." We'd rather be self-made through our own efforts than be what God has made us, but we are gifted by God for good works. We are subjects of not only God's grace, love and mercy, but also of God's gifts. Sometimes we even say yes to God's yes, which is when the gospel is unleashed in our lives and challenges our self-reliance. This is when things get really exciting.