

26 October 2014

**Stories and THE Story:  
The Gospel According to Huckleberry Finn  
Romans 5:6-11**

As I explained last week, we're starting a month of examining the gospel – the fundamental proclamation of the good news of our faith – but we're approaching that gospel from a different perspective. We are looking at the gospel of Jesus Christ as it appears in non-Christian sources. For instance, one key element of our gospel is that evil has been defeated not by opposing it but through the willing, loving self-sacrifice of Jesus on our behalf, and last week we discovered that the same idea forms the heart of the Harry Potter fantasy series. Evil is only overcome by self-giving love.

Now, you might wonder why I'm going to all this bother. If the gospel is right there in scripture, why dig around for it in other books, too? Two reasons. First of all, after we've read or heard the gospel from scripture a few dozen times – every time we say the creed, for instance – our eyes glaze over and we no longer really see how amazing it is. Discovering the outline of the gospel in new places can keep it fresh for us. But there's another reason, too. When we spend all our time in groups of other like-minded Christians, reading only our own special book, we can end up isolated, insulated, inbred, and irrelevant. Our theology makes perfect sense to us, because everyone *we* know believes it. Our behavior is obviously good and righteous, because that's how all those good and righteous people in our church behave. It is sometimes helpful to look at ourselves and our beliefs through the eyes of people who are *not* part of our group. People like, say, Huckleberry Finn.

If you don't know Huck, let me introduce you. He began as a character in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Huck Finn was the semi-orphaned, basically homeless boy who was Tom's best friend and the object of all Tom's envy. Huck never went to school or church, never had to attend Sunday School, but instead slept outside, smoked a corn cob pipe, wore comfortable clothes, and spent his time fishing. As that novel ended, though, as a part of Twain's effort to wrap up every loose end, we saw this free-and-easy boy adopted by a kind woman, the Widow Douglas, who cared for him, fed him, and educated him. Years later, though, when Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, that "happy ending" gave him a chance to comment – through this outsider – on the culture and religion of the pre-Civil War South. As it turns out, Huck is not happy in the Christian world of Widow Douglas:

*Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it.*  
(Chap 1)

The Widow Douglas, at least, has a kind heart. Not all good Christians do.

*Her sister, Miss Watson, a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles on, had just come to live with her, and took a set at me now, with a spelling book . . . Then for an hour it was dreadful dull, and I was fidgety. Miss Watson would say, 'Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry'; and, 'don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry – set up straight . . . why don't you try to*

*behave?’ Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad, then, but I didn’t mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn’t particular. She said it was wicked to say what I said . . . she was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn’t see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn’t try for it. . . . Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing for ever and ever. So I didn’t think much of it. . . . I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together. (Chap 1)*

Well, you have to admit, Huck has a point. We church people talk all the time about what you have to do get avoid hell and get to heaven, like we plan to do. But how often does it occur to us to wonder whether anyone outside our own group actually *wants* to spend eternity with us? Especially *that* eternity. Somehow we’ve communicated to the rest of the world that heaven is like spending forever in church. Seriously now, does that even sound attractive to you?

This matters. How people see us Christians matters. We are the face of God to the world. If we are loving, then people see a loving God. But if we’re fault-finding in others and smug about ourselves, that’s how people will see God, too. And this contradictory picture can be confusing – at least Huck finds it so, as he tries to figure out the nature of God, whom he calls ‘Providence’:

*Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body’s mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow’s Providence, but if Miss Watson’s got him there warn’t no help for him any more. (Chap 3)*

We do need to ask ourselves: which Providence – which God – do people see in us? Miss Watson’s *sit-up-straight!* deity has nothing to do with the God who came to earth to die for the sake of the ungodly. Paul describes *this* God in Romans chapter 5, verses 6-11.

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For 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. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:6-11)*

What we sometimes miss when we talk about the gospel is how unreasonable it is. It just isn’t sensible. As Paul points out, giving up your life is not smart – but giving it up for the sake of disreputable, selfish, ungrateful people like us . . . that’s just nonsense. But that’s what we teach that Jesus did. Maybe you can imagine dying for a friend, or even for a good and admirable

person, but for strangers? People who don't even like you? But that's the gospel: even when we are at our worst, God loves us to the point of giving everything for our sake.

Huck Finn can teach us about that, too. Most of the novel is the story of Huck's journey down the Mississippi River on a raft, accompanied by Jim, Miss Watson's runaway slave. Now you have to understand how horrible this was in that culture. Slaves were already considered less than human; a runaway was considered less than dirt. And a white person who helped a slave to run away . . . well, let's just say that Miss Watson's Providence had a special place in hell for that sort of treacherous sinner. And Huck knows it. He knows he's doing just about the worst possible thing a boy could do, jeopardizing his very soul. He may be an outsider, but he's enough a part of his time and culture to be absolutely sure that what he's doing is worthy of hellfire. He even tries to pray, to get forgiveness, but it doesn't work, and he knows why: because his heart isn't in it. He knows he should write to the authorities turning in Jim, but he doesn't *want* to.

*So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter . . .*

So he does. He writes a letter telling the sheriff where to find Jim to take him back to slavery.

*I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking – thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time . . . and we a-floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing . . . I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog . . . and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him [from those slave-hunters] and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world . . . and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.*

*It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, for ever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath and then says to myself;*

*'All right, then, I'll go to hell' – and tore it up. (Chap 31)*

To understand Huck's decision, you have to recognize that he really believes that in trying to rescue Jim, he is guaranteeing himself eternity in the fires of hell. But he realizes that he loves this man who, in the eyes of their world, is the lowest of the low – not only a black man, not only a slave, but a low-down ungrateful runaway slave. It doesn't matter; Huck loves him anyway. And because he loves him, he will give up everything.

That's what Paul is trying to describe in Romans 5. That's the irrational, ridiculous, insane claim of the gospel: that God loves us – *us!* – beyond reason, and gave everything up for our sake. That's the good news. That's the spirit of love that people should see when they look at Christ's church.

I know. It ain't always that way. But I reckon it could be.