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Psalm 51:1-12; Jeremiah 31:31-34

THE MYTH OF MONSTERS

The PBS TV program called *Finding Your Roots*, involves celebrities who have their family tree traced as far back as possible. During each episode the host and creator of the program, Dr. Henry Louis Gates, reveals to the celebrity guest the details of what the team of researchers have unearthed about that individual's ancestral family. A lot of very interesting American history gets disclosed through each person's family history: such as when and why their ancestors came to America and the hardships they faced both in their original homeland and in the United States. The guests are eager to learn about their family history but there is also a palpable level of tension and anxiety as Dr. Gates shares with them their ancestral story. What will the research disclose? When the information reveals an ancestor who faced great difficulties and surmounted them, or who exhibited exceptional talent, the guest looks relieved and expresses feelings of great pride. They sometimes say things like, "My family will be so glad to know that we come from courageous people," or "Now I understand where my talent comes from." But when the history discloses that their ancestor was a slave holder who fathered children through the rape of his female slaves, or that their ancestor was a criminal who was sentenced to prison, the celebrity guest is clearly very uncomfortable. On such occasions the guest often stammers, squirms, and looks ashamed. The news is clearly a difficult blow for them. One guest, upon learning that her ancestor was in fact *not* a slave holder as she had feared, wiped her hand across her brow and exclaimed with a huge sigh, "Phew!"

It is clear there is more riding on these ancestral histories than simply learning facts about one's family tree. What seems to be at stake is a person's very identity and sense of self. Many

of the guests clearly subscribe to the belief that their ancestral history reflects upon themselves and who they are. An unspoken but fundamental question at play for the guests on the show is, “Am I from good people or bad people?”

As Christians we have a simple answer to the question: “Am I from good people or bad people?” The answer is “yes.” Christianity teaches us that humans are a complex *mixture* of good and bad, light and dark, saint and sinner. I don’t know a great deal about my family tree, but I assume that my ancestral story includes people who were at times noble, courageous, loving, and caring and who were simultaneously possibly racist, sexist, abusive, deceitful, short-tempered, and dishonest. I would not be surprised to learn this because I know who I come from. I come from people. And that is who and what people are.

What we are talking about is that old-fashioned concept known as “sin.” People sin. People are sinners. The word “sin” is out of vogue these days, but if you don’t like that word you can substitute other words if you wish: we are broken, we are alienated from one another, God, and ourselves, we are flawed.

Usually when we think about “sin” we tend to think of actions or behaviors that are immoral, unethical, and wrong: like committing murder, or stealing, or cheating on a spouse, or gossiping, or habits of excess like drinking or eating too much. This way of thinking about sin offers a measure of protection to us because if we can refrain from doing those actions, we imagine that we can avoid sinning. Of course, we acknowledge that we might make *mistakes*, but with careful choices, we can steer clear of real “sin.”

Or so we think.

The Bible however, teaches us a broader understanding of sin. The Bible teaches us that sin is not only actions we commit but is also a condition in which we live. Sin is part of the human condition.

Let's pause for a minute to contemplate what we mean by "sin." Sin is best understood as our turning away from God and God's ways. When we turn away from love, justice, and kindness, when we turn away from faithfulness, respect, and truthfulness, when we turn away from compassion, forgiveness, and gratitude, when we turn away from service and sacrifice and altruism, we turn away from God. And that orientation away from God is sin and it results in our alienating ourselves from God, and from one another, and from ourselves and who God desires us to be.

Sin takes a variety of forms but at its core is this turning away from God's ways in favor of going our own way instead. And this proclivity to go our own way is inherent in us. It is part of the human condition. As hard as we try to live good lives and be good people, we will fall short of who God desires us to be. We will fail. And that is because sin, our turning away from God, is part of who we are. The Bible teaches that sin is indeed part of our very identity. I don't just "sin." I *am* a *sinner*.

That is what the writer of Psalm 51 confesses. Listen to what the psalmist confesses. First the psalmist states, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." We hear a recognition of some kind of sinful actions—"transgressions." But then the writer also states, "Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me." It is a recognition that sin is part of this writer's very identity, that sin lies within and is part of the human condition.

There is a myth that operates within our society. It's the myth of monsters. The myth of monsters promotes the idea that some people are just simply bad. They are monsters who do bad

things. And as monsters, they are different than the rest of us. The myth of monsters is the myth that you can't be a good person *and* also be capable of monstrosities. This kind of thinking establishes a duality in how we approach our world and ourselves. You are *either* a good person *or* you are a bad person. Now while this may seem comforting in some ways, to divide the world in such categories, this perspective is harmful to ourselves and to others. The myth of monsters enables us to judge others for their failings and to categorize them as radically different from ourselves. And the myth of monsters also creates a very heavy burden for us. Because when we do sin, or when we realize that our ancestors sinned, our very sense of self is threatened. How can we accept ourselves if suddenly we have to face that we are now relegated to that category of "bad" people, or that we come from "bad" people?

The HBO series *Search Party* is a dark comedy about a group of four millennial aged friends living in New York City, all of whom are very self-absorbed people. When one of the friends hears a news story about a former college classmate who has gone missing, she becomes obsessed with trying to locate this missing acquaintance—not so much for altruistic reasons but to satisfy matters that plague her own sense of self. She draws her other friends in on her efforts to find the missing woman. As the plot unfolds in this dark comedy, we observe the four friends engaging in deceitful, unfaithful, illegal, unethical, and even murderous activities. At one point, after burying a dead body in a suitcase in the woods, the four friends are freaking out as they get back in their car when one of them says to the others, "Listen, we are good people!" And the others answer in a chorus of affirmation, "Yes! We are good people!" That refrain echoes throughout the series as the characters try to reconcile their horrific behavior with their desperate need to see themselves as good people.

Our desperate need to see ourselves as good people can be a burden. It can prompt us to keep our sin at arm's length to avoid facing it or dealing with it. But here's a really paradoxical statement: embracing our sin can be good news. That's a weird statement for sure!

But here is why that's good news. Rather than living in the duality of there being good people and bad people, the Christian faith offers us a narrative that affirms we are both. We are people comprised of both light and dark. We are both good and bad. And still God loves us! And still God loves us! Our identity is not dependent upon our being good people or bad people but upon the knowledge that God loves us *while we are yet sinners*.

When we embrace this identity, that we are people whom God loves while we are yet sinners, we are freed to face our sin without fear because our identity is no longer dependent upon our own behavior but upon the love of God. The good news is not only that God loves us while we are yet sinners, but that God's love is intended to transform us. When we are free to face our sin, not only our sinful actions but the broken condition within ourselves, we face our need for help. We cannot overcome sin on our own. And so we turn to the transforming and healing power of God to enter our hearts and souls. The psalmist who wrote Psalm 51 faces his or her sin and cries out for this transforming God to heal and to help. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me."

Sin is part of our story—our personal stories and our ancestral stories. Sin is part of our identity. But there is good news in embracing the reality of our sin. When we are freed from the myth of monsters, we are able to move beyond the narrow definitions of ourselves as either good or bad. We are then free to understand that our identity as both saint and sinner rests in God's love. And we are liberated to understand that our neighbor's identity rests in being a child of

God's love. Jesus came not to point out who were the "monsters" and who weren't. Jesus came in love to heal and transform *all* of us while we are yet sinners.