

# The One and the Many

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If you do the math on the passage from Romans that Nicole read for us a few minutes ago, you might come out with the title of this morning's sermon.

At least I hope you do, because that's the best I could make of Paul's words about sin coming into the world through one man and death accompanied sin and since all sin so all die and then one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all except that the trespass wasn't like the gift because if the many died through one man's trespass much more surely have the grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus, abounded for many . . . and on and on Paul goes being Paul, trying to make the case, simply put, that as far as our human condition is

concerned, Adam broke it, Jesus fixed it, so go with Jesus. Or, to put it another way, Adam was the way into this mess, Jesus is the way out. Again, go with Jesus.

However you crunch it, the equation remains the same: it's the relationship between the one and the many, the situation described in the title of Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which inspired this series of sermons for Black History Month.

This morning, we pivot into Lent, and the texts appointed for this morning, including the passage from Romans 5, have to help us transition from looking at our Christian lives from the underside of history, as Thurman urged us to do, to looking at our Christian lives from the more fundamental perspective captured in this morning's three readings: the nature of human sin, what it leads to, and how those consequences can be overcome.

Lent forces us to take the step prior to human history, which is the nature of human nature. This morning we have to hold in creative tension the relationship between the many – we call that history – and the one – the individual human beings who make up and then are caught in human

history.

That's the through line that ties this morning's three readings together, which is why I've dumped an uncharacteristically large number of Bible verses into worship this morning. Our Bible and Bagels group had the luxury a few days ago of digging into these passages a little more deeply than I have in twenty or so minutes, but the Scriptural arc is that the first reading from Genesis narrates the story, the second reading from Paul states the problem, and the third reading from Matthew reveals the solution. And the recurring theme running through all three readings is the relationship of the one to the many. One ancestor sinned and we all inherited the propensity and consequences. One ancestor resisted sin and we all . . . we all what? Inherited the ability to resist sin and avoid sin's consequences?

The short answer is yes, we inherited both, because both *'adām*, which means “earthling” in Hebrew, and Jesus, which means “Yahweh saves” in Aramaic, are both our spiritual ancestors. They both bear symbolic names because they represent some fundamental truth about reality greater than whatever historical reality may be attached to the symbol. That's what all

symbols do: they point beyond themselves to some larger, greater, and more important truth.

The historical Jesus matters, obviously—he inspired the world's largest religion, after all—but what he **represents** matters more.

That name about salvation—if you're going to follow Jesus as many of us are claiming these days as we distance ourselves from toxic Christianity—if you're going to follow Jesus you're going to have to take his name seriously, because his identity is represented in his name: “God saves” or “God's salvation.” And the first place where many of us progressive religious types stub our toe is on the whole notion of needing salvation.

Most of us liberals functionally jettisoned the notion of transcendent salvation decades ago, substituting something along the lines of Eric Berne's “I'm OK-You're OK-We're all OK” transactional analysis model. We in the church baptized that essentially secular worldview by sprinkling it with a little “I believe in God or a Higher Power,” embracing Jesus as a nice guy and terrific ethical teacher, and seeing religion not as much in salvific terms as in therapeutic terms: religion is supposed to make me and, through me, the

whole world feel better. And if we feel better, the reasoning runs, we will act better. The ethical follows the emotional.

My pal Greg, whom some of you met a while back, tells me that the academy calls this religion “moral therapeutic deism.” In that view of the human condition, we don't need no stinking salvation, we just need a little spit and polish to ethically smarten ourselves up. Or perhaps a little more education for us sensitive types and a whole lot more education for them out there among the great unenlightened—that'll do the trick. Many of us, functionally, are like the proper Bostonian who was asked by a visiting evangelist if she'd been born again, and she replied that having been born on Beacon Hill she saw no reason to be born again. I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay. We just need a little nudge. Moral therapeutic deism.

Orthodox Christianity, on the other hand, rooted in the underside of history as distinct from privileged fantasy, says something different, and Lent is the time to be reminded of that message. We are not okay, just as we are, and a little nudge here and a little poke there and a little prod at the other place will not make us the people God created us and calls us to be. As I said

to you last week, Jesus was a radical and if you are serious about following Jesus, you will have to radicalize yourself. You will have to go all the way down to the very root of who you are, and allow God to orient your fundamental self in an entirely different direction, because the direction that the world points us in is that broad path that leads to destruction, which Jesus warned us about, and about which most of us think Jesus was wrong.

He was not.

We are.

I was at the gym the other night making myself feel inadequate, and Ilia Malinin was on the big screen. It was breathtaking. What that young man can do balanced on two thin steel blades on ice would be unbelievable were not literally billions of us watching him be the “quad God.” I thought to myself, This is as close to human perfection as anything I've ever seen.

And that combination of congenital ability and monomaniacal focus and relentless training may indeed show us what is possible as distinct from what is normal. But we don't get to live in that world, we have to live in this one, the normal world, and no serious student of history or of politics or of

economics or of environmental science or of psychology or of religion can honestly point to a single moment in normal human history and say, “There, there it is, when we got it absolutely right!” It never happened. It isn't happening now. It never will. And why? Because it is not within our human power to get it all right any of the time.

At our very best, we approximate, and our approximations toward our divine personhood and that divine collective Jesus called God's realm amount to little unless we are willing to change direction radically, resist the world's temptations, and direct our lives toward God within us – our spirituality, the one – and God among us – our religion, the many. For the spiritually and religiously serious, as opposed to the wannabes and the posers, those two realities—the one and the many—have to be held not simply in creative tension, but in Creator tension. The tension within which God holds our lives—finding that and maintaining that is what we mean by discernment.

*Jesus and the Disinherited* is about the one and the many. The Genesis theologians' story about our original spiritual ancestry is about the one and

the many. And Jesus' reliance on God's grace, combined with his own monomaniacal efforts is about the one and the many.

There is a path friends, out of this morass where “ignorant armies clash by night.” That path is narrow, it is not easy, and it most certainly will not be offered to you by our politicized, monetized, commercialized, narcotized world. It is offered, however, by the one who chose that path, the path that led to Calvary and the empty tomb.

Howard Thurman closes *Jesus and the Disinherited* with an Epilogue in which he discusses the necessity of what he calls the “life working paper” of every person who wishes to be a person. That life working paper “is made up of a creative synthesis of what [a person is in all their] parts and how [that person] reacts to the living process” (p. 100).

All of us have such a working paper, but the vast majority of us do not put in the time and energy required to make that paper a blueprint for a life that is anything other than ordinary. But every now and again, an exception appears. Thurman says of such exceptions:

“Wherever there appears in human history a personality whose story is

available and whose reach extends far, in all directions, the question of [that person's] working paper is as crucial as is the significance of [that person's] life. We want to know what were the lines along which [they] decided to live [their] life. How did [they] relate [their self] to the central issues of [their] time? What were the questions which [they] had to answer? [Were they] under some necessity to give a universal character to [their] most private experience?" (p. 101)

Thurman concludes,

“Our attention is called to such a figure because of the impact which [their] life makes upon human history. For what is human history but [a person's] working paper as they ride high to life caught often in the swirling eddies of tremendous impersonal forces set in motion by vast impulses out of the womb of the Eternal. When a solitary individual is able to mingle [their] strength with the forces of history and emerge with a name, a character, a personality, it is no ordinary achievement. It is more than the fact that there is a record of [their] life—as singular as that fact may be. It means that against the background of anonymity [they have] emerged

articulate and particular. Such a figure was Jesus of Nazareth” (pp. 101-102).

I don't ordinarily pay much attention to the biblical figure of the Antichrist, but nothing says Antichrist to me as much as our highly exalted global, political economy, with its branches and tendrils, whose names are Legion, reaching into every corner of our lives. Caesar, friends, has many names. Jesus has but one. One for the many.