

Torn, but not fatally

A Sermon on the Lord's great mercy by the Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

“That which was torn by beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it”
Gen. 31:37.

This sermon is about times when you may seem guilty, but in the eyes of the Lord you are not. A lot of people are sure that they have chosen to do evil, and are guilty of it, but at times the Lord says something very different.

But first let us talk about human freedom. The Lord preserves our freedom to love what we choose to love and to believe what we choose to believe because without these we can enjoy no happiness at all. Other kinds of freedom are often limited, but these the Lord guards as you guard the pupil of your eye.

Therefore the New Church teaches that we have unabridged responsibility for our own choice of heaven or hell. No one is ever forced to go to hell - if they do it is their own choice. Every one of us has the responsibility to make that choice - at some time.

But: there are times when our most precious freedom - to progress towards heaven by choosing to do what you believe to be right - is interrupted. It can never be taken away forever. If not in this world, then certainly in the next it will be restored, and you can choose what you freely want. But it can be corrupted - sometimes for a lot of years.

The simple truth is that in this very disorderly world a lot of innocent people are led astray. They are corrupted by others - often intentionally corrupted, and they suffer grievously because of it. And they seem to be making very bad choices because of it!

This is the point: They seem to be making very bad choices. Yet in the eyes of the Lord they are not going to spiritual death. They are wounded. They are represented by the animals that have been “torn.” The image is of a beast which is caught in a thicket and its skin is ripped. It is wounded. It will probably carry a scar for the rest of its life. But it is not a fatal injury.

And here is the principle, as the Lord reveals it when He talks about the laws of His leadership. He says that it is a law of the Divine Providence that no one “should be compelled by external means to think and will, therefore to believe and love the things of religion. Instead a person should bring himself to do so, and at times compel himself.” DP 129. Then it goes on to explain: External compulsion is when some force outside of you causes you to make a bad choice - an external force so strong that your freedom is temporarily impaired.

One of the things that takes away that freedom, and therefore makes you not guilty is “mental illness.” Now we think of that as a form of mild insanity. But the Writings for the New Church expand the idea. Among the list of things where our freedom to think clearly and to feel clearly is impaired we find “spurious and false conscience, grief of heart arising from misfortunes, distress and mental anguish owing to some physical disorder.” (DP 141). [Let's repeat those in simpler terms: (1) being taught something is right when it is really wrong; (2) something terrible happens to you and out of grief you do the wrong thing; and (3) because of something that happens to your physical body - a trauma or a sickness you are in real distress and make bad choices.]

That is a wide definition, isn't it? But the point is made that in states like these our rational faculty, and "so the freedom of acting in accordance with reason" is not present.

Now we know lots of situations where that is clearly true. A person under the stress of the moment does something really bad, and then realizes it and is truly sorry. We know that we will not think of her or him as "hell-bound." But what is amazing is the extent to which the Lord takes this principle. Consider the third lesson this morning. Two examples are given. One is of a person who is trying to fight her faults and live a good life, and then she is really taught that her efforts are useless, because she is saved by faith without any effort of her own. She is genuinely persuaded by manipulative people that this is so. Then, because she finds it hard to fight her faults she now gives up.

The Lord says that she is not to blame! That's amazing, isn't it? She's not to blame for the bad things she then does! They will scar her. They will tear her outer skin, but not destroy her spirit.

The second example is even more amazing. A couple are married and they love each other and feel that marriage is most precious. Then they are persuaded - and this is not too surprising given the weird "values" we find in the world today - that marriage is not holy, and that they can modify their marriage as long as they both agree. If they then live lasciviously, it is not imputed to them.

It seems, doesn't it, that they have willingly abandoned their values for a more disgusting lifestyle. For a lot of people that would be true. If you really know that marriage is holy and fidelity of mind and body is required of both partners, and if you then abandon that because you want to do other things - not because you were persuaded from outside but because you persuaded yourself - then you are surely guilty. But there are people who are led astray in this confused world because their values were not very well established at first. They got married, they wanted to believe in everlasting true love, but they were unprepared for the battles that lay ahead, and they didn't know how to deal with them. Then along came a so-called friend who said that they had it all wrong, and that to "spice up their marriage" they ought to lower their values, and they were genuinely persuaded. Such things have happened.

The trouble is that in this confused and at times morally bankrupt world people are hunting for values and often finding them in the wrong places. So they are preyed upon by those who want to manipulate and use them.

It is hard to speak of these things, but we need to reflect on another kind of "persuasion" - that of abuse, whether verbal or emotional or physical or sexual. A young child or even an adult is abused by another person, and that seems to be something that affects her or his emotions. But it does more than that. It often teaches her false values. The experience of life is a powerful teacher. It may make her think that she is worthless and deserves bad treatment. It may make her believe that sexual immorality is her lot in life, and so as an adult she seems, consciously and deliberately, to enter into immoral acts. When she reflects on her life she simply thinks she is a worthless or evil person, unable to have the values that she sees others to have.

But notice what our lesson says! It states very clearly that there are two kinds of evils that we "adopt of our own accord." One of them we are not guilty of! Why? Because it is

“an evil we have received from others.”

There are many people who are “torn.” Their lives have taught them values which they seem to choose, and freely adopt. But they have not freely adopted them. They have not been able, because of the mental stresses they have been under, to see clearly what is right and what is wrong. In the definition of mental illness that the Writings for the New Church give, they are mentally ill for a time.

The Lord sees the pressures under which our spirits sometimes labor, and He does not blame us for anything which we do not freely choose in a state of clear rationality.

Why is this teaching so important? There are many reasons. An obvious one is that the guilt we feel for things that the Lord does not hold us accountable for causes needless misery. There are so many people walking around today who feel utterly hopeless about themselves. They see their faults so clearly and believe, as the Psalmist says, “there is no salvation for him in God!” But perhaps an even more important reason is that this crippling feeling stops us from breaking free of our “torn” state. We stay with coping mechanisms which don’t work, which bring misery and devastation in our lives because we don’t know that an all-merciful and loving God has a way out for us. If you are torn you can heal! You don’t need to stay wounded. You can take responsibility for your health and just as an injured person can find the right therapy, you too can find it in the lord’s Word.

Now there are a few cautions that must be added. First of all, it is easy to blame others for our faults. A few decades ago there was a form of counseling which - whether it meant to or not - encouraged young people to feel that all their problems were simply the result of their parents’ bad raising of them. So what they did was transfer all the blame for the things they did to their parents (and often told their parents so), and assumed that they were good people who had simply been victims.

I think we can all see that there are parents who traumatize their children, and then the children may be among “the torn.” More often we can see that parents are human, fallible people, trying to do their best, and making mistakes, and when we grow up and see their mistakes we reject the negatives and love them for the positive, and move on - and realize that we may make different mistakes with our own children, whom we hope will forgive our mistakes.

So it is the serious hurts, which cause a person to take the wrong path in life - because he or she is acting from deep hurt or from a wrong conscience - which is meant in this merciful teaching that our Lord doesn’t blame us for such things.

So how do we heal? Well, that’s the important thing. First, we may need to see that we were not guilty of certain things in our past, and feel the wonder of the Lord’s mercy leading us away from those things. Second, once we have realized that this wrong way of life was imposed upon us, we need to search for the truths that can help us to reject what we used to think or feel. If you see that you have an injury, treat it! Don’t just say, I’ve been hurt and it wasn’t my fault and stay injured. Instead, move ahead with the assurance that the Lord has no anger towards us, no pleasure at all in what we have done. Instead He has an abundance of truths to lead us into a completely new phase of life.

A lot of people feel that the innocence with which they greeted life was destroyed

along the way. Well, sometimes it was and it is our own fault. Sometimes it was and it was through the bad things others did to us our taught us. Either way, the Lord's truth can restore innocence. Many people who have been grievously hurt by others have said that counseling gave them clarity about what happened in the past. But healing came from their religion - from a realization that the Lord's truth has the power to let them change, and to become very different people.

It is a sad fact that bad things happen to good people, and then those potentially good people make foolish choices, under the pressure of their grief or in their ignorance of what else they could do. What is really hard is that the memories of those bad things live on with them. They are like the scars on an animal whose skin was badly torn by vicious thorns. Like a scar they linger in our memories.

But if we make an effort to heal, most scars fade and are scarcely noticed. The Lord came on earth - twice - to heal us. In His love He knows how much people have hurt some of His children, and He puts His special attention to healing those hurts. As He said, "In the world you shall have tribulation. But have confidence! Have confidence! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). His truth can restore the innocence we sometimes lose through no fault of our own. (In fact, He can restore the innocence we lose through our own fault!).

None of this takes away our responsibility to heal. If we have been torn, and we realize it, then the truths of the Writings are indeed medicine, for the healing of the nations. We need to find the truths that can heal and use them to restore our freedom and our mental health. And if we were not really torn, but have willingly done what is wrong, we should not seek for excuses and instead use the truth to do the work of repentance. But the point of these teachings is how merciful the Lord is, how He does indeed bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captives, and how He will comfort those who mourn because of past misdeeds which may have been forced upon them. If we will but heal, the past is forgotten by Him; our future is heaven. Amen.

Opening Prayer: O Lord, You have indeed come to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to comfort those who mourn, and to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness. We thank You for this Your great mercy and kindness to all of us, and pray that we may find it in ourselves to seek Your mercy.

Children's Prayer Lord, we thank You for Your great kindness to us. You look down on us all, and understand us and know exactly how to help each one of us, so that we will be led gently to heaven. You help us to stop doing the bad things that we have chosen to do. You help us to stop doing the bad things that we have learned through bad habits. We pray that we may learn, each day, to let You lead us, that we may be forgiven, even as that woman who was a sinner was forgiven by Your great mercy.

Closing Prayer: Most merciful Lord, You know all the frailties of humankind. You know that in this disorderly world, much unhappiness is brought on innocent people. You grieve for every single hurt Your children suffer, and are always present to forgive, and to heal. We pray for others who have been hurt, that they may feel Your healing powers and walk towards You, sometimes through difficult times, but always with Your strength to uphold. And we pray that we ourselves may be healed in Your great goodness, that we may not do what is wrong to others.