

May 30, 2010

Exodus 2:11-22

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

## **THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SAINT AND A SINNER**

I read an article several years ago in the New York Times about a man in Mississippi by the name of Brandon who had been convicted of drunk driving and vehicular manslaughter, having caused the death of a 4 year old girl. A tragic story --- to say the least. Unfortunately, a tragic story that gets played out on our streets just about every night. But what caught my eye in this story was the punishment that had been levied against Brandon. Not only had he been sentenced to 20 years in prison --- but to make sure that he did not forget what he had done --- the judge in the case ordered Brandon to pay a fine to the family of the young girl he had killed. The fine was in the amount of \$520. And Brandon was specifically ordered to pay the fine to the family in increments of \$1.00 a week. That is to say, Brandon was responsible for writing a check for \$1.00 every Friday and sending it to the family as a means by which he would not forget ... at least for 10 years ... that he had caused the death of a little child.

Now regardless of what opinion you might have about the severity of this sentence --- some of you might think it too severe ... and others of you might think it not severe enough --- that no amount of checks and no amount of weeks would suffice as a punishment for this kind

of crime --- it made me wonder – this type of sentence --- \$1.00 a week for years and years and years ... it made me wonder what kind of sentences you and I are serving.

Now the fact that you are here suggests that you are not presently serving any hard time. But I wonder to what degree you and I feel that there is something that we have done in our past ... for which we are still paying a price even today. Hardly a week goes by where there is not someone who arrives to talk to me about this problem or that problem ... and after a little discussion we discover that there is something that has gone on in their past --- for which they feel they are still paying the price today.

Maybe it is a man who felt like he never measured up when it came to his father. His dad was a taskmaster, a perfectionist ... and he was always getting chastised by his dad over not quite getting it right. And still today every time he sees his dad ... his dad says something ... does something that reminds him that of who he isn't. Every time he sees his dad he feels like he's writing out another check.

Or maybe it's a woman who tried her best at being a mom ... but with the way life goes and all the pressures and having to work ... she never felt like she was the mom that her kids needed her to be. And every time she's with her kids she keeps racking herself over the fact

that she could have done better. And she keeps writing out one of those checks that keep reminding her of her past.

Or maybe it's someone who comes in to see me with a failed relationship ... or a broken promise .. or a failure of resolve ... something that they didn't stand up for ... and they feel so bad that they didn't stick it out ... or at least stick to their convictions --- and whether they know it or not – maybe even subconsciously every day ... they feel like they are writing out one of those little \$1.00 checks and sending it to somebody ... maybe they are even sending it to God.

We do that a lot ... you know. We send these little \$1.00 checks to God ... and we say ... you know God ... I know that you say that you are a God of forgiveness --- but just in case you're not ... here's my \$1.00 check to make sure we're covered for all the bad things I've done.

How about you? Is there anything you're still paying for? Any sentences you're still serving?

You know I think it's an amazing thing that one of the great prophets of the Old Testaments ... one of the great leaders of Israel .. one of the models of scripture --- did some

hard time: Moses. It's not uncommon for the heroes of scripture. Joseph did time. Daniel did time. Jesus did time. Paul did time. Peter did time. John the Baptist did time. And so here we are with Moses ... doing time. Self-imposed time, really. He was a fugitive ... he committed murder and when the word starting getting out --- that's when Moses took off. Fled for Midian. Never ended up behind bars ... his sentence was exile. Exiled from his people ... exiled from his family. It's not the story we often hear about Moses. We hear about the bulrushes ... we hear about the Passover ... we hear about the parting of the Red Sea ... we hear about the Ten Commandments --- but we don't often hear about Moses on the lam. But there he is ... and can you imagine him at whatever age he is ... making his run for the border ... leaving everything behind and saying to himself, "This is it ... my life is over. I have become an alien ... a fugitive ... a refugee. I am going to spend the rest of my life making out those \$1.00 checks."

Moses, like all of us, had a past. He was running away from something. But, you know, that's really not the issue, is it? The issue is not whether Moses had a past. The issue is, does Moses have a future?

Now we who know the story know that Moses is going to have a future!! But how was he to know it ... when he was fleeing for his life? This is not the way you prepare the man who is going to be one of the greatest leaders in the history of human kind. Hello? Can we see some

SAT scores please? Can we see his high school transcript? Can we see what college he went to? A resume? All we got is an illegal immigrant!

Why does the Exodus writer feel obliged to tell us about Moses' past? Why didn't he just start with the burning bush? Why did he have to include all this seedy stuff about Moses' past? Because, you know, it never gets mentioned again. No one again mentions how Moses was a murderer. Pharaoh doesn't bring it up. The Egyptians don't bring it up. The Israelites don't bring it up. So why does the Exodus storyteller bring it up?

Could it be that the reason we hear about Moses' past --- is because we all have a past? Could it be that this saint ... and you don't get more saintly than dear old Moses ... this dear old saint ... had just as much of a past as you and I? Could it really be true what Oscar Wilde once wrote that the difference between a saint and a sinner was that every saint has a past ... and every sinner has a future?

The Bible is just littered with people who have a past! Jacob had a past ... he was a lie and a cheat. Joseph had a past ... sold into slavery by his own brothers. David had a past ... a fugitive and an adulterer. Peter had a past ... faithless, cowardly, denier. Paul had a past ... murderer. The woman at the well had a past. The woman caught in adultery had a past. Mary

Magdalene had a past. And everyone of these who had a past ... the Bible says ... also had a future.

Do you know that? Do you know that about yourself? The God who knows your past ... is the God who has great plans for your future. Do you know that? And do you know that the way that God wants to take you into his future ... is that he wants to pry your fingers off your past. He wants to cancel the \$1.00 checks. He wants to erase the old tapes. He wants to insert some permanent amnesia. When we say that God has a future for us ... what we are not saying is that God just has more things for us to do ... more jobs ... more tasks ... more chores ... more assignments ... more slave labor. No, when Scripture says that God has a future for us... he's talking about a new creation. He's talking about going to Midian and starting all over. He's not talking about an old dog doing new tricks ... he's talking about a whole new dog!!!!

You remember the old story – some say it's true – of the missionary priest in the Philippines who throughout his ministry had carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed in his youth. He had never spoken a word of it to anyone ... but the guilt continued to crush him. In his parish there was a woman who deeply loved god and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ and Christ with her. The priest was somewhat skeptical so one day he said to the woman: “OK ... if it's so that you and Jesus have this conversation back and

forth ... the next time you speak to each other ask him what secret sin your priest committed when he was a young man.” The woman agreed.

A few days later the priest asked the woman, “Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?”

“Yes, he did,” she replied.

“And did you ask him what sin I committed while in seminary?”

“Yes.”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said, ‘I don’t remember.’”

Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. Is it possible for you to imagine that you have a clean slate? Is it possible for you to imagine that you get a do over? But maybe just as important as that --- is it possible for you to imagine that everyone in your life gets a clean slate with God? That everyone in your life gets a do over? Is it possible for you to imagine that that’s what this body is all about? We are the body of people who are in the business of do overs. That if you want a second chance ... well then find yourself a church? If you want to stop writing \$1.00 checks ... well then come to the communion table? If you want a clean slate ... if you’re a sinner and you want a future ... if you think you blew it but you want to be a saint ... well then come on in! Is it possible for you to think that way?

Did you read about the Mennonite Church in Landisville, Pennsylvania who had occur within their body a terrible tragedy. A 14 year old son of the church ... one Sunday afternoon murdered his parents and sister. An event that shook that body of people. Devastated the community. What's the church to do? Well, they established a legal support committee to provide for his needs so his surviving brother and sister wouldn't have to. Founded a "seventy times seven" fund to collect money to cover the boy's expenses. They studied grief and forgiveness in sermons and Bible studies. They held a service of lament for those they lost and a service of forgiveness for the one who remained. Why? Why, for God's sake why? Because God doesn't give up on anybody ... and that means anybody. Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.

In a previous church I served we had appear in our pews one Sunday morning a man who didn't quite fit the prototypical Presbyterian profile. Bob was a little disheveled ... a little smelly ... a little inarticulate. Didn't seem to have a full deck upstairs. Bob kept coming every Sunday. I went to visit him in his apartment that was even more disheveled and smelly than he was. I invited him to join the church if God was so leading him. So Bob came to the new members class – which was a series of classes. He was there at every one of them. Then it came time for Bob to meet the Session. A few minutes before the Session meeting Bob came to my office and told me he couldn't join the church. Why not, Bob? I asked. "I don't think I'm allowed."

Why not?

Because I did time.

You did time, did you? Where did you do time, Bob?

The Northeast Center for the Criminally Insane.

Oh.

And what did you do time for?

I murdered my wife.

Oh.

Bob went on to tell me the story – and it was true – he was criminally insane at the time.

So you see, he said, that's why I can't join the church.

I said, Bob – do you believe Jesus loves you.

Yes.

Do you believe Jesus died for your sins?

Yes.

Do you believe that Jesus still has a plan for your life?

Yes.

I said, Well then welcome into the kingdom.

A couple years later – it was my last Sunday at that church. And Bob came to my office and he had a painting. A beautiful painting of a church. And beneath it a caption – “A Future with Faith”. I said, Where did you get the beautiful painting Bob?

He said, I painted it.

He said, I painted it the year you were born. I painted it when I was in the Northeast Center for the Criminally Insane. I want you to have it. Because it's true ... he said, what I wrote back then... it's true. I do have a future with faith.

Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future.