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The Second Sunday of Advent
December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Beginning with John the Baptist

One of the people who had a big impact on my theological formation—an engagement with scripture, the relationship between religion and culture, the nature of grace, and so forth—is a Swiss theologian named Karl Barth. He did most of his work from the 1910s through the 1960s. He doesn't have much popular cachet right now, though, at one point in the 1960s, he was on the cover of *Time*. Barth interpreted everything—literally everything—in the light of Jesus Christ, his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Everything is about Jesus and our response to Jesus. Barth's academic theology is not always the easiest stuff to read, but if you give yourself over to it, one can experience it as a symphonic reflection on the story of Jesus. It's urgent; it's inspiring. I really like it.

There is an unfortunate wrinkle in the story of Karl Barth, however. After his death, it became clear that he had some kind of inappropriate relationship with his long-time female secretary, over the course of many decades, while he was married to his wife. As far as I am aware, nobody knows the prurient details, but it doesn't matter too much: the point is that something was not right in the relationship of those three: Karl, his wife, and Charlotte von Kirschbaum, his secretary. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

But that's not really the most unfortunate part, from the point of view of people who like him a lot. The most unfortunate part is that we see, in his private correspondence, how he uses some aspects of his otherwise excellent theology to justify what he's up to.¹ No need to go into details; the point is that the same stance that led him to concentrate so much on the centrality of Jesus Christ for all things was also twisted in order to justify behavior that (whatever else it was) wasn't good, that violated the promises he had made to God and his wife, and no doubt caused a lot of personal pain to her. For people who like Barth, like me, it is an unfortunate, and harmful, wrinkle in his story. For someone who holds him in high esteem, the effect is like a rock falling through a spiderweb.

It raises questions about Barth, sure, but that's only the beginning. Because this episode isn't just an illustration about how all people are sinners, which is completely unsurprising. It is about how even basically good people can suffer from delusions about themselves and their actions. Barth didn't seem to have any shame for this; it's not (it appears) like he was racked with guilt and wished he could stop but couldn't. He convinced himself that it was okay and carried on for decades. What we're talking about, with Barth, is being in a situation when we are wrong, but are sure we're right, and produce the best reasons for why.

What this confronts us with is the fact that all of us have the capacity to use our good thinking and careful opinions to justify things that are no good—to justify sin, in other words. Our

¹ For one reflection on this, see <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/october-web-only/what-to-make-of-karl-barths-steadfast-adultery.html>.

bad intentions are easy to deal with, relatively speaking; the problem is with our otherwise good intentions that get twisted in the wrong direction, such that we think what is wrong is right. The problem is that our judgment itself is wrong.

Russians have a term for this: *prelest*, a spiritual self-delusion, a kind of seductive conceit, pride, blindness to the truth. Identifying *other* people's self-delusions is a popular thing to do. Picking out the specks in *other* people's eyes is a favorite human pastime. But if Barth can be deluded, we all can. And—and this is the worst thing of all—if we can, in this fallen world, we probably are. We probably are, right now: our judgment, impaired; our self, deluded. That is unnerving. We are ourselves in some pattern of life that is destructive and harmful to other people, but we don't even know it.

So what do you do with that? Because it seems like a basically hopeless situation. We're not only guilty about the things we know we're guilty of; we're probably also guilty for things we don't even know about, because we've convinced ourselves that they're not so bad; that we're basically good people who, yeah, make a mistake from time to time but in general are basically okay. But this isn't the case, so what do we do?

Most of us think of Christianity as this really big thing, this global phenomenon. And it is pretty big. There are tons of churches on every continent in the world (even Antarctica); Christianity is the most cross-cultural religion in history. There are churches all around; you could go to a different church every week and never run out, probably, and all within driving distance. And the faith as practiced is old, really old; it has cathedrals and officials and a long history. The post office closes for its holidays. Even people who don't know the specifics of the Christian story are usually still aware that it's a thing that is big in the world.

But, at root, all of Christianity, as a faith practiced by people, rests on the foundation of a group of people, two thousand years ago, who had a direct experience of Jesus and found both that he was the only person in history who didn't have any wrinkles in his story, and that because of that, he could smooth out all the wrinkles in their stories, and indeed had. The Church rests on nothing else but this event in history, this actual thing that happened over the course of a couple years, about these particular people in the Middle East. They weren't theologians or professional religious types or even particularly smart. They met Jesus and it turned everything in their lives upside down, and they couldn't stop talking about it. They met him and saw that he was the only person in history who didn't have any wrinkles in his life, and they saw how much he loved them, and they saw, at his resurrection, that God loved them that much, and could smooth out the wrinkles, and that was it. And in the blink of an eye, in cosmic time, Christianity becomes this big thing, like we think about it. But it didn't start that way. It is what it is only because of this historical event where a few hundred people's lives were changed, and they couldn't stop talking about it. Jesus could do that, and Jesus alone.

And when those same people, two thousand years ago, the people on whom our faith rests, are telling these stories about Jesus of Nazareth, their Lord and their God, who changed their lives, and they start writing the stories down into what we call the gospels, they all start with John the Baptist. In all four gospels, you can't get to Jesus without going through John the Baptist, and in the gospels, John the Baptist says, "Repent." We hear it in today's gospel. He is the forerunner; the last prophet; the one who points to Jesus and says, "He's the one. Repent."

The word "repent" means literally to turn. We think about it, rightfully, as something that we do cognitively or emotionally, but it could be concrete for John the Baptist. People were with him and John the Baptist could point at Jesus and say, "Literally turn and look at him. He's the one. He is the Lamb of God who smooths out all the wrinkles in all the stories of the world. Turn toward him; go, look at him and be with him."

That's what they did, some of them, anyway; they turned to Jesus, and it changed their lives. They were happy. Those early followers of Jesus, they didn't go around moping and beating their breasts and saying how bad they were and feeling bad about themselves. They were ecstatically happy because in turning to Jesus all at the same time (1) they knew their guilt, (2) they knew his innocence, and (3) they knew that as a result of the latter, the former had been done away with. As a result, they were the happiest people in the world. They didn't care about anyone else pointing out their wrinkles; they didn't care when people didn't like them; when the Romans supported them or when the Romans persecuted them, it didn't matter.

What do we do about our *prelest*, our tendency toward spiritual self-delusion? The fact that even our judgment is off? All four gospel writers say: the place we start from has to be a place of repentance. This is step number one. The Second Sunday of Advent is all about repentance, because it's all about John the Baptist, and John the Baptist went into the wilderness, and what John the Baptist said when he got there was, "Repent; turn to Jesus." He points to Jesus because, in what is otherwise a hopeless situation, Jesus brings hope. It isn't something we can do on our own. We can no more smooth out the wrinkles in our story than a spider web can stop a falling rock. It goes right through. Only Jesus can stop it.

The baby in the manger in Bethlehem stops it. God, made a child, stops it. At the eventual cost of his own life, he puts himself between the falling rock and us, the spiritually self-deluded. It's only a few weeks now until we welcome him. To prepare ourselves, the Church says, turn to him. To get ready, John the Baptist says, turn to him; repent. Know that the one who has no wrinkles in his story is the one who can smooth out all the wrinkles in yours—the ones you know about and the ones you don't. When we know it, when we know that he loves us, then we can love him too, and we can see that his love is the only thing we need. Love the child in the manger, know how much he loves you, and it will indeed be a very merry Christmas.