

**September 9, 2018**  
**Finding Jesus in the Dark**  
**1 Samuel 24:1-4, 8, 11, 16-18**  
**Mark 2:15-17**  
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<sup>15</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. <sup>16</sup> When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

<sup>17</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said to them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable, in your sight, O lord, Amen.*

I love Television. I always have. Fortunately, I had a mother who would come into the den on nice days, turn the TV off and say, "Go outside and find something to do." If she hadn't I am quite sure I would have vegged out all day watching things I didn't even like.

Today it's a different story. With cable, Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and Crackle, not to mention TED and U-Tube, if you can't find something interesting or entertaining to watch, then TV is just not your thing. The competition among all those groups is fierce and currently, we the consumers are the great beneficiaries. In my opinion, right now, on the whole, Television writing, acting and directing is superior to that found in popular movies at the cinema. So, when I have leisure time, and my favorite sports teams are not playing, I would just as soon binge-watch a few shows of a new series on Netflix as go out to a movie.

And I have a confession to make: while I enjoy comedies like "Modern Family", and more traditional positive shows like the Star Trek series, or reruns of Andy Griffith or Mary Tyler Moore, most of the shows I watch these days are pretty dark – shows like "Shameless", "Black Mirror", "Ozark", "Sinner", "West World", "Jessica Jones" and "Stranger Things."

I enjoy them. And I think I enjoy them because, like real life, the light and the dark are often a lot less clear, the heroes flawed and unlikely, the villains usually not all bad, and the moral decisions to be made, complex and difficult.

In other words, these shows are not only a lot like life, they are also a lot like much of scripture: they don't sugar coat the human condition and they reveal that even some of the most terrible people are yet capable answering the call to heroic, sacrificial, service. These dark shows and the darker portions of the Bible draw me in precisely because they don't hold back; as a result, there is something about them that rings the bell of Truth and authenticity.

Take our morning Old Testament story for example. It reads more like two drug Lords facing off in an episode of "Breaking Bad" or "Better Call Saul" than it does sacred religious text.

King Saul is Israel's very first King. But he has fallen out of favor with the prophet Samuel and by association, God himself and therefore with a large part of the people of Israel. There is a new rising star on the horizon – none other than the shepherd David who has been Saul's trusted advisor and Saul's son Jonathan's best friend from his youth.

Now, as an adult, David has become one of Saul's top generals, commanding large armies on Saul's behalf against the Philistines. But to Saul's dismay, he has discovered that the prophet Samuel has betrayed him, proclaiming to the people that God has changed his mind about Saul and has had Samuel anoint David as the next and future king. For whatever reason, God now trusts David over Saul to take care of the Holy dirty work of wiping out the Philistines to establish Israel's rule on the territory.

This enrages Saul and he turns on David, seeking to hunt him down and rid him of his potential political rival. So, now, David is in a bind. How do you remain loyal to God's anointed when you are also God's anointed? So rather than confront Saul, he hides from him in a series of caves until he can find a way to convince Saul of his loyalty and call off his attack.

In the meantime, Saul is determined to hunt David down. But in the midst of his hunt, like everyone, he has to go to the bathroom. So he goes into a cave, away from his men to relieve himself. As it turns out, the cave he enters is the very one in which David himself is hiding.

So, as soon as he drops trou, David's men whisper to him to take advantage of the situation: "Kill him while he has his pants down." But David refuses; regardless of the current circumstances, Saul at one time had God's blessing upon him. And so, instead of striking Saul Down, he slices off a piece of Saul's robe. He then waits for Saul to finish his business.

But before Saul can return to his men, as a sign of faith and show of loyalty, David jumps out of the shadows and shows Saul the pilfered swath of robe. Saul weeps with fear and remorse and the two embrace.

But, of course, this is far from settled. Saul's jealousy and suspicion of David will eventually get the best of him, and will finally even lead to his own violent death.

Saul is among the chosen of God in scripture as is David who will later commit adultery with his top general's wife, get her pregnant and then order his murder to cover up his crime.

What do we make of that? What do we make of such morally questionable behavior among those who were considered favored by God? What do we make of bathroom humor in the bible?

Well, we realize that God's plan for us is not limited by our frailties; God can and does speak through human weakness, human darkness even – through our resistance, our insecurity, our sinfulness.

Some of you may know the name of Will Campbell. He was a Baptist from Mississippi who went to Yale Divinity School and eventually became a civil rights activist. He died in 2013 at the age of 88 and as far as white civil activism goes, he was a maverick, way ahead of his time. As a

child in the late 20s and 30s he remembers his family's home church having Bibles with the symbol of the Klan inscribed on them. In 1954, the adult Campbell, took a position at Ole Miss as Director of Religious life. He resigned in 1956 after receiving death threats due to his outspoken stances regarding racism at the school.

He subsequently took a position as a field officer for the National Council of Churches. It was dangerous for him to return home, but at one very low time in his life, he did. His 12-year-old nephew had died, after being hit by a car while riding the bicycle that he, that is, Will had given him.

The tradition was that someone would keep vigil with the body, and that task fell to Campbell. He sat in the funeral home after the calling hours had ended, alone with his grief. At about 3:00 in the morning, another person moved out of the darkness, poured coffee from a thermos and handed it to Campbell. It was the man who, when Will had been a child, had been Will's favorite uncle, a man Will had not seen for many years, because the uncle had become Campbell's most severe critic about his activism. Campbell looked at his uncle's face. He saw there compassion mixed with hurt and misunderstanding and the two men sat together for the rest of the night. Looking back on it, Campbell wrote (quote) "Until the dawn, I sat there in the redemptive company of a racist Jesus."

A racist provides redemptive company for a civil rights activist. Saul and David, both blessed by God fight it out to determine the future of God's people. The Son of God himself finds better company among tax collectors and sinners than he does Pharisees, Sadducees and the righteous. How could that work? It's ultimately mystery and the glory of God's grace. Kathy Donley, "The World's Shortest Sermon." [emmanuelalbany.net](http://emmanuelalbany.net). Retrieved August 9, 2017.

Even though these are people whose behavior may at times be morally reprehensible, God is yet somehow with them, *in* them, even...God is present. We just have to discern how.

But it's hard – especially when you have lived a privileged life.

I grew up a privileged member of the upper middle class with a set of values that are wholesome and good and worthy of a lifetime of aspiration by everyone.

However, as I come to better understand the truth about social and historical context, class and race, poverty and wealth, I must admit that it is a set of values that are not necessarily achievable by those who are a lot less well off.

In other words, I think the way I do about goodness, and therefore, act the way I do out of that perceived goodness, in large measure, because I can *afford* to think and act the way I do. That doesn't necessarily make me more righteous – more blessed for sure – but not really more righteous.

Now, I absolutely agree that as Christians, indeed, as a whole human race, we need to hitch our wagons to wholesomeness, goodness and light. I therefore do not advocate using this morning's story about Saul and David as primary teaching material to that end. There are other places that are much better sources for that.

So please hear me: there is no better way to find one's moral and ethical center than to follow the light of Christ as revealed in scripture. In a world of increasing moral relativity, regardless of who we are, or where we're from, we *must* be shaped by something that is rock solid. And, so as the Apostle Paul advocates, we best put on the whole armor of God. Our children, too: The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of proclaiming the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. We need such things to protect us from the very real evil that is in the world.

However, the very act of putting on that armor can have the unintended consequence of putting us out of touch with real pain and suffering; because a large portion of the pain and suffering that happens *in this world* happens precisely to those who live in the dark among the very evil powers that the armor of God was designed to protect us *from*.

To make the world whole, eventually we have to move away from the light to retrieve those who suffer in the dark. It is what Jesus did. It is what he calls us also to do. But be warned: doing so often brings a crisis of identity. One cannot remain unsullied and also love those who are currently swayed more by the powers of darkness. On the other hand, we are fooling ourselves if we have come to believe that we are all goodness and light. Recognition and ownership of our own dark parts is necessary for understanding who we really are and what we are called to be and do. As Novelist Robertson Davies once wrote, "One only learns the mystery of who one is at the price of one's innocence."

And what is innocence really? The origin of the word "innocent" has no direct association with guilt. It actually comes from the Latin for "unwounded" or "not harmed." Thus, it can be said that the innocent one hasn't yet learned from his or her wounds, and therefore doesn't know his or her full reality yet. He or she remains in the Garden of Eden where the full understanding of who one is has not yet dawned because one is unaware of one's own darkness. That kind of awareness doesn't come until one is tempted, gives into the temptation and then must face the consequences. And so it can be said that the better part of Human life is forged in the shadowlands of twilight, never inside of pure light or total darkness. Adapted from Richard Rohr, *A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*, discs 1 and 3 (Franciscan Media: 2004), CD. The Davies quotation is from *Fifth Business* (Penguin Classics: 2001), 245.

Many of those in the world today who have lost their innocence, both young and old, have lost it because it was violently taken from them – not because they gave it up. On the other hand, most of us present here today had people in our lives from our childhoods onward who, not only loved us, but had the means to keep us safe; to keep our innocence in tact until we had developed strength enough to face its loss.

The movie, "Ray" recounting the life of singer, Ray Charles, has a scene in it that is all about this loss of childhood innocence. And it heart-breaking. Ray's mother knows she is raising a blind black child in the dangerous, racist, white culture of 1930's America. And so she also knows that she does not have the power to protect her beloved son. So she decides she will take away his innocence as an act of love rather than have the world do that and possibly break his spirit. She pushes him away from her and towards independence. She is harsh with him – forcing him to rely on himself in spite of his blindness. In one scene, she stands in the room in silence with tears flowing down her face as her eight-year-old son in a panic cries out for her because he needs

something. She wants him to conquer his fear and get what he needs without support since she knows he will not be able to count on it in the real world.

When he realizes she is not available, he finds what he needs on his own without her. At that point, his mother makes her presence known and embraces him.

Dante's "Inferno" is all about this loss of innocence, It actually involves a literal descent into hell – a series of various levels of human suffering. "Inferno" begins with the sentence, "In the middle of life, I found myself in a dark wood" [*Inferno*, Canto 1].

If we're living by the same black and white ethical understanding of life now that we did when we were very young, or live under the impression that the same rules that apply to others don't apply to us, it could very well be that we have lived a life of such luxury that we have never really lost our innocence.

But for most us – even those more privileged, we will eventually be led to the dark wood where we have to ask: "What does it all mean? Why am I doing this? Why don't I feel fully alive or that my life has meaning? What am I doing wrong?"

Those who have lived a life of survival due to oppression, poverty, neglect or abuse, are usually required to begin answering these questions long before the rest of us. But regardless of when it happens, most of us have bouts of immense self-doubt and even at times self-hatred at this point.

Jesus says to the privileged religious establishment: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick; (not the innocent who need an advocate, but those who have lost their innocence). I have not come to call the righteous, (the innocent) but sinners."

It is only by a foundational trust in the midst of suffering, some ability to bear darkness and uncertainty, and learning to be comfortable with paradox and mystery, that you move, like Dante from one-sided innocent perfection, to one-sided guilt-laden sinner and then finally back to the middle, back to the center-point which is where Christ, the white rose, and the path to becoming a whole human being finally lay.

Jesus turned the world upside down. He revealed that much of the real darkness was to be found in those assumed to be the people of the light – that is the Pharisees – and that much light was to be found among the people of dark – that is the sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes...

It's a paradox and few of us do well with paradox. But at the center of our faith is grace which is in itself a paradox.

Like the grace paradox to be found in that of the criminal, Jesús Manuel Cordova. As the story goes, a mother and her young son were out driving in the southern Arizona desert on Thanksgiving Day, 2007. Going around a curve, the mother lost control of her van and it fell into a canyon, ending up 300 feet from the road. She was pinned inside. Her 9-year-old son managed to crawl out of the vehicle and began wandering through the desert, looking for help.

The desert is an unforgiving place, and the story probably would have ended with the boy's death too, were it not for the man named Jesús Manuel Cordova. He came upon the boy, who was distraught and disoriented. He found a way to comfort the lad, even though he spoke no English and the boy spoke no Spanish. The boy led him back to the crashed van, and Señor Cordova tried to get the mother out, but couldn't. A short while later, she died of her injuries. Then, this good Samaritan gave the boy water, and with the cold desert night closing in, his own jacket while building a bonfire so the two of them could keep warm in the cold desert night.

Some hunters finally happened by and called the authorities. The boy was taken to a hospital, checked for injuries and released into the custody of other family members. As for Jesús Manuel Cordova, well, he was just an illegal immigrant who had just crossed the border from Mexico. So for his trouble he was turned over to the Border Patrol, who promptly deported him. Associated Press, "Man entering U.S. illegally stops to help boy involved in crash," *The New York Times*, November 25, 2007. See also Carli Brosseau, "Illegal immigrant saves orphan lost in desert," *Tucson Citizen*, November 24, 2007. [tucsoncitizen.com](http://tucsoncitizen.com). Retrieved January 30, 2016.

So where is Christ to be found here? Among those upholding the "light" of the law or in the "darkness" of the criminal Jesús? And to where do you feel called to look?

Let us pray. Lord God so often we are so sure that we know exactly what you require and therefore who's among those you favor and who's among those who are not – those who are innocent and those who are guilty and exactly what that means. Make us less sure and like Jesus, your son and Jesus Cordova, more compassionate towards those who suffer, no matter what the cost. And now bless these gifts that they may go too relieve suffering among those who deserve it and those who don't. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.