

Wesley and the Heretic

TEXT: Romans 5:12-14, 5:18-2, and 6:1-2

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on August 25, 2024

For this week's heretic, we move from Greece, Egypt, and the Middle East all the way up to Britain to meet a man named Pelagius, although we're still in a very early time frame in the fourth century.

Pelagius was a theologian, but not a priest, and had no formal religious authority from the church. Although well-educated, his time was not spent in the ivory towers of academia, but living simply among the people of the British Isles, beloved as a kind of spiritual director for clergy and laity alike, advising those from all strata of society on how to live a godly life.

We have very little of his writing, but we know a good bit about what he believed from the response of his critics. In particular, his ideas got under the skin of his contemporary, Augustine, the bishop of Hippo in North Africa. St. Augustine made it a personal mission to have Pelagius declared a heretic, and published screeds and convened councils against Pelagius until he got his wish.

Still, however, Pelagius never saw the inside of a prison cell or the eyes of an executioner, and ended his days in peace, protected by St. Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria—no doubt as Augustine fumed. The protection of Cyril is notable because Cyril was a pretty aggressive hunter of heretics himself. But he did not put Pelagius in that category.

I want to look at Pelagius because, in his thinking, we find a debate within the early church that touches almost every debate that will come later. It's a fork in the road that, once taken, points the way toward different sets of conclusions to other theological divides that underlie Christian arguments and denominational divisions right here in the 21st century. John Wesley agreed with Pelagius, so let's peel off some layers and go back to that fourth-century fork in the road.

Like the Gnostics we visited last week, Pelagius encouraged a sparse, ascetic lifestyle—but for very different reasons than the Gnostics. The Gnostics shunned bodily comforts because they believed physical matter was either an obstacle to be overcome to free their true spiritual natures or that the material world was entirely illusion and therefore deserved to be ignored.

Pelagius, on the other hand, encouraged asceticism because he thought the idea of God's grace made Christians lazy. This same point has been made across Christian history. In the 20th century, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer coined the term "cheap grace" to represent those who don't think how we live our lives really matters because God will forgive us if we just say we're sorry.

"Cheap grace" is a theology that believes grace is costly, but only for Jesus, not for us. Grace is amazing in this view, largely because it's so easy. No need to put extra effort into trying to be a better person, you can just be forgiven and start again tomorrow. The phrase, "Well, I'm only human," when used as an excuse for bad behavior, is a contemporary manifestation of cheap grace theology or, what Pelagius would call "lazy Christianity."

I picked a rather fractured set of Bible verses from Romans 5 and 6 for this morning because Pelagius spent a lot of time in that part of Romans—especially focused on the question at the end of the set of verses we heard last—the first two verses of Romans 6.

Earlier in Romans, Paul has been talking about the wondrous nature of God's grace for several chapters. The notion that he could be forgiven by God's grace—that he didn't have to earn his salvation—was the fuel that directed Paul's zeal away from hunting those he previously viewed as heretics—the Jewish followers of Jesus—and toward spreading the news of that amazing grace across the globe.

Those same early chapters of Romans totally altered the life of Martin Luther, who responded by altering the religious landscape of Europe with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Martin Luther then wrote a commentary on the book of Romans, which John Wesley heard read aloud by some Moravians at a low point in his life two centuries after Luther.

The idea of not having to earn God's favor but receiving admission into the circle of God's care as a gift from God instead—grace—reached right down into John Wesley's soul and he wrote in his journal the famous words that his heart had been "strangely warmed."

He then proceeded to change England as a tireless champion for social reform and then brought the movement to the United States where his "Method" spread like wildfire. And here we are. Methodists.

During the fourth century, the North African bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, was having his own life transformed by that same section of Romans 3. It doesn't appear that Pelagius had any issues with those initial chapters in the book of Romans. But

Pelagius saw in them a danger—a danger Paul also saw and expressed right at the start of Romans 6: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

Already in Paul’s lifetime—a life that ended when the pointy end of a sword took off his head on the orders of the Roman emperor Nero in about 64-65 AD—Paul could see that bumper-sticker faith could lead people away from the whole point of Jesus life and the core teaching of both Jewish and Christian faith—that the purpose of all God’s law and the teaching of all the prophets was to move people, indeed to free people, to be able to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength and their neighbors as themselves.

To my mind, many of the problems and conflicts that have arisen in Christian theology across time have come because people seem to forget that the book of Romans doesn’t end with chapter three. In the rush of emotion at realizing that we don’t have to earn our way into God’s favor—in the overwhelming relief and joy and strange heart-warming that comes with dropping that existential anxiety to embrace a loving God—those who feel that joy most deeply share it with others without reservation.

And while it lands with the same force on the personality type of perfectionists like Paul, Augustine, Luther, and Wesley; it can have a different effect on personalities that have never been overly concerned with their behavior in the first place, unless there’s a strict enforcement mechanism to keep them in line.

Paul is one of the very few scholars who can believe and defend something with zealous intensity and also pull back enough to understand how the articulation of those beliefs, without any nuance, can lead to problematic outcomes. That’s what he’s guarding against at the start of Romans 6.

Paul recognizes that the absolute, unconditional love of God, given as a gift not based on merit, can be heard both as life-changing amazing news to some and as the best excuse on the planet for doing whatever we want to others. “By no means!” says Paul, and Pelagius took up that cry from Romans 6, even as St. Augustine was writing his Confessions in the ecstasy of Romans 3 and landing in the exact places that I think Paul was warning against.

After the fall of Rome to the Visigoths in the year 410, Pelagius went to Africa and basically had it out with Augustine, who denounced Pelagius in several public letters. The short version of the rest of Pelagius life—to the degree that we know it—is that when it didn’t go well with Augustine in Africa, Pelagius went to Jerusalem.

Augustine was on his tail, and Pelagius was accused of heresy in Jerusalem in 415, but managed to exonerate himself. Augustine then teamed up with Latin biblical scholar, St. Jerome to keep up the attack. Pelagius wrote in defense of free will in 416 and that got him condemned by two African councils. The following year Pope Innocent I excommunicated him, but died shortly thereafter.

The next pope, Zosimus, welcomed Pelagius back to the church. Augustine then organized a council in Carthage in 418 which investigated and condemned Pelagius again, which made Zosimus relent and condemn him, too. Pelagius then went to Alexandria in Egypt where Cyril, the bishop there, welcomed him and Pelagius continued his work there until his death, which was only a few months later.

Clearly, Augustine took the claims of Pelagius personally; but it’s equally clear that even within the circle of the church’s early bishops and popes, it wasn’t a given that Pelagius was really out of bounds. So, what got Augustine so hot under the collar? What was the real threat?

The claims of Pelagius were two-fold. First, Pelagius insisted that human beings were, at their core, good. In other words, he denied original sin. Pelagius found nothing that would contradict the assertion in Genesis 1:31 that God looked at human beings, along with all the rest of Creation, and pronounced the entirety of it “very good.”

Since we don’t have much of his writing, and since this week I’m on the same side as the heretic for the key issues, I’ll make the case for his position rather than trying to put words in his mouth. So...on original sin. Teaching that eating the fruit in the Garden of Eden somehow erased all vestiges of that created goodness seems like a stretch. Could human beings have such power that they could eradicate the essential goodness that God put into creation? I find zero biblical support for that.

We can willfully ignore our essential goodness; we can fall out of practice to such an extent that the image of God within us becomes invisible to others and even to ourselves. But can we actually erase the fundamental nature of Creation as good? And the doctrine of original sin goes farther, trying to tell us that such an erasure is epigenetic and effects every other human on the planet from Adam on down to this day.

Even the most literal reading of the Fall and God’s curse in Genesis 3 doesn’t make that claim. And while you can get there by proof-texting Paul’s claims about Jesus; you can’t get there from Jesus himself, which is required, as far as I’m concerned.

The importance of that question, about the fundamental nature of creation in general and human beings in particular, can't be overstated. If it's not the very first fork in the theological road, it's darned close. I think Augustine was so insistent on original sin because his own withering self-examination led him to believe that God's originally-created goodness couldn't possibly still exist, because he had tried and tried and tried some more to do what was good and righteous and holy and simply could not.

Paul said in Romans 3 that we were saved by God's grace and not by our own effort, and Augustine just sat right there, exhausted from his own attempts to save himself, and never moved. Belief in Jesus, who Paul calls a "second Adam," could reverse the consequences of what the first Adam had done in the Garden and give us a get-out-of-jail free card. Our works don't save us—which is great news since we all keep sinning—God bails us out with grace. And that's true as far as it goes. But That. Is. Only. Chapter. Three.

Pelagius saw the work of Jesus as more practical and less magical. To my knowledge Pelagius didn't deny that Jesus was God in the flesh. Nobody condemned him for that, so I suspect he didn't say it. I think Pelagius would have agreed with Paul that Jesus was a kind of second Adam—that the fully human life of Jesus, that the Council of Nicaea affirmed, served to prove that the first Adam could have made a different choice, as can we all.

Dr. Sara Misgen, a religious scholar now at Brown University sums up Pelagius' beliefs in a piece called "Sin, Grace, and Ancient Heretics: Revisiting Pelagius," which I quote with her permission.

"What's attractive about Pelagius is his unabashed affirmation that human nature is *good*. He takes God's affirmation that creation is *very good* from Genesis 1:31 and weaves it throughout his understanding of what it means to be human and what it means to be Christian.

"Because humans were created in God's image and declared to be excellent by their creator, Pelagius reasons that human beings must have enormous potential to live into that goodness, which they can do by freely choosing either good or evil.

"For Pelagius, humans decide who they are going to be via repeated action of truly free choice. God does not interfere with human affairs by bending or shaping our wills: we do that ourselves. Repeatedly following God's law and doing good makes it easier to continue doing so, whereas repeatedly choosing evil makes doing wrong easier and good harder.

"We are, for Pelagius, who we decide to be, and we have full choice in that.

"Now God does interfere in human history to help humans choose the good, first by giving the Law when humanity became so tarnished it was unlikely they'd be able to ever get back to their state of created goodness, and then by sending Christ.

"Jesus, as Pelagius describes him, 'encouraged' all of humanity 'by his example to pursue perfect righteousness.' The blood of Christ does cleanse and wash human beings, enabling a warped will to be unbent and placed at 'neutral,' but human beings still need to make their choices and pursue perfection in following God's will."

That's a long quote from Dr. Misgen, but it artfully shows how the major forks in the road of Christian theology and belief lead to different outcomes and how to follow the road from one belief to another. While many of Pelagius' detractors named his issue as running afoul of the church's doctrine of original sin, Methodism's founder, John Wesley, in the 18th century connected some dots and said,

"I verily believe, the real heresy of Pelagius was neither more nor less than this: The holding that Christians may, by the grace of God, (not without it; that I take to be a mere slander,) 'go on to perfection;' or, in other words, 'fulfill the law of Christ.'"

The first fork is the fundamental nature of human beings after Genesis 3. Is the image of God still in there? Is Creation still good? Augustine took the path that answered, "No." Pelagius took the path that said, "Yes."

Pelagius' road then hit an obstacle: If humans are, in their truest essence, good--still made in the image of God, no matter what Adam did or didn't do—then what do we do with the obvious fact that people do atrocious things?

One answer is that they can't help it. Original sin deprived them of that choice. That was Augustine's answer. But, Augustine said, "Good news, there's grace, so God will save you anyway."

"Not so fast," say the signs on the Pelagian road. Original sin would require that, for Jesus to be without sin, he couldn't have been fully human. Because all humans are sinful by nature. And, if Jesus had the sin that must come with being fully human, he couldn't also have been fully God, who can't abide the presence of sin. Yet you have this lovely creed from the Council of Nicaea, which the Roman Empire blessed as the truth of Christianity, insisting that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

If it's true that Jesus is fully human AND without sin; moreover, if the Bible is right in saying that Jesus was actually tempted to sin; then there must still remain a moral core within all human beings that would allow us to freely choose our actions. If we

can't freely choose, then temptation has no meaning, and Jesus' ethical instructions and the entire law of Moses are moot. Anything else leaves the "fully human" claim about Jesus with an asterisk. He could live that way, but we can't? Then all Jesus' teaching was wasted breath.

That's the next fork in the road. Are human beings free agents or are our actions pre-determined? The details of that debate will have its own week in this series, but Pelagius and Wesley both took the free will path. And that took Pelagius, and later Wesley, to the destination that I think was at the root of the real objections they faced.

If our human essence still contains all the goodness inherent in the image of God, and if we are free to choose our actions; then it must be theoretically possible, even though extremely difficult, to always make the choice that Jesus would make in our situation; to live the life that he lived; or, in the words of the ordination question for all United Methodist clergy, "to be made perfect in love in this life."

I think that inevitable conclusion terrified Augustine and many others because it threatened the return of the existential anxiety about not feeling good enough for God. I also think the particular way that Pelagius expressed the belief was insulting, since it implied that those who didn't pick austerity as the way to get their own spirits primed for good choices were lazy. That didn't help his cause.

But, if we're honest, original sin and having everything pre-determined does lift a lot of weight off of us. If Pelagius and Wesley are right, then we have to fully and intentionally participate in our lives. We can't coast, except by making Christ-like choices become so well-practiced that they come easily and naturally.

We have to practice what we preach; we have to walk the walk; we have to not just be the change we want to see in the world, but be the love God placed at the core of our being when the world was begun. Have you tried loving your enemies lately? It's not a cake walk.

It's hard enough to do what we know we should; but complicating matters is that the right choice is often really, really hard to figure out. Love...well, yeah, but what does that even mean? "What is the loving thing to do in this particular circumstance?" is perhaps the hardest of life's questions.

We're frequently confronted with situations that are the result of generations of cruel or negligent choices by actors both obvious and hidden. What love looks like in that moment can be hotly debated and not at all obvious, even before we throw in that we ourselves have our own histories, and on any given occasion may be tired, mad, in pain, or whatever.

As ridiculous and offensive as it is to look at a newborn and say, "Yeah, the core of that infant is sinful, and that will be plain the first time she screams, "No!" in my face," It's still a small price to pay to allow "Well, I'm only human" to be a viable excuse for my own behavior.

I understand that allure. I also understand the judgmental, abusive nature of forcing on someone a moral code they have not chosen and how the fear of losing the "well, I'm only human" excuse can be a substitute for fearing exile from our communities, or the loss of any number of freedoms.

But, to return to both Paul and Bonhoeffer, it is exactly that dilemma that makes Romans 3 and the news of God's grace the world-altering gift that it is. If sin were inevitable, if we had no real choice, those acts can hardly be called sin and forgiving them can hardly be called grace. What kind of monster God would make it impossible for us to do what's good and then pretend to be magnanimous in letting us off the hook? That's the God of gaslighting, not the God of love.

"What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" To me, grace doesn't *counter* original sin, it wipes the idea off the map. I think the fear of thinking perfection is possible is a remnant of our fear that God's nature might be wrath rather than love.

We are born imperfect; not in the sense of being born bad and sinful, but in the sense of being born as babies—immature and in need of training and guidance. When we make a poor choice and sin—which we will, as inevitably as an infant learning to walk will fall down—God will help us back to our feet and show us what Paul, at the end of 1 Corinthians 12, calls "a more excellent way." And when that thing that made us fall in the first instance comes at us again, we will have greater and greater ability to remain on our feet.

Grace. God's love combined with our sincere effort to reflect God's love back to our Creator with every breath. That is our salvation, our witness, our joy. Also, Romans has 16 chapters. Amen.