

“The Truth Will Set You Free”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

During the season of Easter we encounter the truth about ourselves and the truth about Jesus. There is probably no greater asset than knowing the truth about oneself. Self-knowledge and the acceptance of one’s self opens the way to overcoming challenges and a realistic struggle with reality. Self-knowledge often comes through struggle and mistakes, and further, it also gives us empathy with others who also struggle with their shared human condition.

Paul held up a mirror to himself in the Letter to the Romans writing, *“For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”* Paul was keenly aware of his humanity and the lengths to which his theological position as a Pharisee had driven him in the persecution of the early church. His encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus began a lifelong journey of both serving Christ and sharing his faith with others. Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ was an encounter that Paul treated as historical fact, with very real consequences for his life. It opened him to truly seeing himself anew in the light of the risen Christ.

It is probably safe to say that Paul’s words also apply to all of us. Like Paul, all of us have done things that we wish we could undo or erase. All of us have encountered the chasm that exists between what we know we should do and our human inability to make it happen. This applies both to us as individuals and as a collective group, as human beings. As human beings, we know the good we should do in society in making the world a better and more just place, yet we continue to experience the chasm that exists between wanting to create good and just systems and institutions and the compromises we make that result in half-hearted measures, never quite achieving what we know needs to be done. Paul writes for all of us, *“Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*

For Paul, salvation wasn’t the stereotypical “free pass to heaven” sort of thing; rather, salvation was an encounter with the living Christ that helped free Paul from his own misery and sinfulness. Salvation begins as we are encountered by Christ and recreated with a new sense of self and identity. This is the hope of Easter. The truth that is the living Christ sets us free to be ourselves, allowing us to reclaim God’s image in us that had been lost to sin. In the Gospel of John Jesus tells his disciples, *“Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”*

True freedom is not what we tell ourselves we want to do. True freedom is a liberation that happens when Christ holds up a mirror before us allowing us to encounter the truth about ourselves. The risen Christ forgives us and thereby frees us to finally live for God and for others. The freedom that the world tells us we should have never satisfies because it is a self-centered “freedom” in

constant conflict with competing understandings of freedom held by others around us. Only in the encounter with the risen Christ is humanity finally freed in the most profound sense, allowing us to encounter others in their isolation and alienation from one another. We finally become agents of the forgiveness, acceptance, and hope that we have received in Christ.

In graduate school I participated in a seminar in which we read Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*. Dr. Pannenberg was in Chicago to lecture at the University of Chicago, and one evening he attended our seminar and in a patient and engaging way answered questions about his theological works. Pannenberg's theology is well-known for the manner in which he deals with Christ's resurrection and its implications for history and humanity. Pannenberg wrote of the "dignity and misery" of humanity. He looked at the human species from the standpoint of evolution, arguing that "it is hard to imagine in principle any evolutionary advance beyond them." Human adaptation to different conditions of existence has made humankind extremely resilient, laying bare our destiny for union with the God who created us. Pannenberg writes, "We claim this distinction only because we are the same species as the one man in whom the eternal Son took shape." The inalienable dignity of humanity is mediated through the Son, Christ Jesus.

However, though Pannenberg argues that we can do nothing to change our destiny with the Creator, at the same time we also experience great misery and "lostness" from God. Pannenberg writes, "The term 'misery' sums up our detachment from God, our autonomy, and all the resultant consequences." As free agents possessing autonomy, we mistake "freedom" for agency, and experience the consequences of our actions. As human beings we live in alienation from God and from our neighbor. Pannenberg assesses our situation writing,

We moderns are well aware of the experiences of misery and self-alienation in our human situation... We need redemption because of sin, which is the root of our alienation from God and the self. But we can speak of redemption only in relation to an event that creates freedom for the redeemed. The fellowship with God mediated through Jesus Christ can mean redemption only on the condition that we thereby become free.

Most of our trouble as human beings flows from the mistaking of agency for true freedom. Until he was encountered by Christ Paul thought he was dead right in persecuting the church. Paul's encounter with the risen Christ allowed him to see his own misery and alienation from God and neighbor. In the encounter on the Damascus road Christ set Paul free from sin and its consequences.

During the season of Easter we have an opportunity to, once again, see ourselves in the light of the risen One. Christ comes to us daily, offering truth about himself as our "destiny for fellowship with God." Seeing ourselves anew, we also see the destiny of others – of all humanity - for fellowship with God. Who will move us from our human misery to see our shared human dignity in God? "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Amen.

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**Easter Week 4 midweek meditation reading:** Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014)

“The Dignity and Misery of Humanity” (*Systematic Theology, Volume 2*)

“The productivity of life, which continually expresses itself in the emergence of new forms, pushes evolution forward. This fact does not of itself mean that in the sequence of forms one of them will be the climax beyond which there can be no further advance. Humans are certainly the most developed form. By intelligent adaptation to different conditions of existence, they have steadily extended their dominion over nature and thus represent the culmination of the evolution of organic life on this earth. Unless a disaster exterminates all humanity without also destroying all organic life, it is hard to imagine in principle any evolutionary advance beyond them. Only from the standpoint of the religiously and biblically grounded awareness of their destiny of fellowship with God, the author of the universe, can we say assuredly, however, that all creation culminates in humanity... Only in the light of the incarnation of the eternal Son as a man, however, can we say that the relation of creatures to the Creator finds its supreme and final realization in humanity. The relation of the Son to the Father cannot be transcended by any other form of relation to God. As the eternal God took form in a man, and through him made acceptance as children of God accessible to all other men and women, the relation of the creature to the Creator has found in principle the highest fulfillment that we can possibly imagine.

From the standpoint of our human nature can we claim this distinction only because we are the same species as the one man in whom the eternal Son took shape. This event is not external, however, to our being humans. In it we see our destiny as individuals and as a species. The human destiny for fellowship with God, which finds definitive realization in the incarnation of the Son, means that humanity as such, and each individual within it, is lifted above the natural world and even also above the social relations in which we exist. The destiny of fellowship with God confers inviolability on human life in the person of each individual. It is the basis of the inalienable dignity of each person.

A feature of the dignity that accrues to us by virtue of our being destined for fellowship with God is that no actual humiliation that might befall us can extinguish it. In a special way, because they have nothing else that commands respect, the faces of the suffering and humbled and deprived are ennobled by the reflection of this dignity that none of us has by merit, that none of us can receive from others, and that no one can take from us.

The situation is different where no regard is paid to the dignity of our divine destiny and people act without dignity. In this case human life is more marred than it is by oppression, mistreatment, or miserable outward conditions. Such conditions may indeed be unworthy, unjust, and humiliating for us. Although misery of this kind runs contrary to our divine destiny, it does not of itself alienate us from this destiny.

Misery, then, is the lot of those who are deprived of the fellowship with God that is the destiny of human life. Alienation from this destiny does not abolish it. Its continued presence is the basis of our misery, for in alienation from God we are robbed of our true identity.

To speak of human misery is better than using the classical theological doctrine of sin to describe our situation of lostness when we are far from God. The term “misery” sums up our detachment from God, our autonomy, and all the resultant consequences. It brings out more clearly than the term “sin” itself the relation between sin and its ramifications. The term “alienation” has a similar breadth. It has two sides, both an action we can take and a situation we can find ourselves in. We can alienate ourselves from someone, and we can also be in a state of alienation. In German the equivalent *Entfremdung* is etymologically close to *die Fremde* (the foreign country), with the implied thought of being away from one’s own country (cf. the English “alien”). Alienated from God, we live in the misery of separation from God, far away from the home of our own identity. In the New Testament, alienation describes the state of the Gentiles, who “are alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18; cf. 2:12 and Col 1:21)...

We moderns are well aware of the experiences of misery and self-alienation in our human situation... We need redemption because of sin, which is the root of our alienation from God and the self. But we can speak of redemption only in relation to an event that creates freedom for the redeemed. The fellowship with God mediated through Jesus Christ can mean redemption only on the condition that we thereby become free. This is so when fellowship with God helps us to self-identity, and this in turn presupposes that we are destined by nature for fellowship with God. (*Systematic Theology* 2:175-180)

**Book recommendations:**

*The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*. (edited by Carl E. Braaten / Philip Clayton), Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988.

Pannenberg, Wolfhart, *Systematic Theology* (three volumes). Grand Rapids, MI & Edinburgh: Eerdmans and T&T Clark. 1988-1994.

**Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928-2014)**

Wolfhart Pannenberg was an eminent Lutheran theologian, who for most of his career was professor of systematic theology at the University of Munich. As a student, he studied in Berlin, Göttingen, Heidelberg, and with Karl Barth in Basel. Pannenberg first taught in Wuppertal and then Mainz, and was visiting professor at the University of Chicago, Harvard and the Claremont School of Theology. Pannenberg’s work has made significant contributions to the doctrines of revelation, Christology, and the resurrection; and in addition, to the theology of history, eschatology, the church, science and Christianity, anthropology, ethics, and ecumenism. Pannenberg’s theology is rigorous in its biblical exegesis and historical framework arguing that all reality is touched with the grace of a loving God who promises reconciliation of all creatures through the Easter resurrection of Christ Jesus.