

"UNBREAKABLE"
AUGUST 11, 2019
John 3:1-8

Is anyone beyond redemption? Is anyone ever past the point of no return where God will not love them or welcome them home upon their death? In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of being spiritually "born again." Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church in John 3:1-8:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

In 1995 I was living a very different life from the path God leads me on now. I was running around busily trying to keep all the balls up in the air, driving around town from place to place, attempting to give

people attentive, quality time in small spaces of opportunity, doing a lot of public speaking and persuading, managing a staff, reading and writing, and praying that I would be able to cover it all expertly and efficiently.

Oh, wait! That sounds like what I do now! Ha Ha. But of course, it's different these ministry days, because I have been "born again."

On December 27, 1995, Jason Mayo, by just days 18 years old, and his friend Robert Johnson, entered a motel room on South Santa Fe Blvd. near Arapahoe Community College to visit a man known to them as "Monte." They stated to Monte they were there to buy drugs, but when Monte went to shake hands with Jason, he was shot in the eye from only 3 inches away. Death came quickly, and the young men fled.

Soon thereafter, they returned to the scene of the crime and made it look like a drug deal gone bad. Then they went out to a nearby Waffle House and made jokes to one another and others about the killing, asking people if they wanted to "smoke a dead man's cigarette" and mimicking the sounds made by their victim as he died. Stone-cold they were. At age 18, they were already unbreakable. Unreachable. Incapable of redemption.

Many of you have met my good friend, Judge Jack Smith. He came here and played his dulcimer for us in worship a few years ago. He is also a good friend of Sharon Worley—he is how Sharon and

Tom were encouraged to come here -- and he has been my steady mentor and supporter for over three decades now.

Judge Smith caught this case. It was his responsibility to conduct the jury trial or, if a plea agreement could be reached, to sentence these young men to prison, for that was the only option for this 2nd Degree Murder. Neither of the boys had any means of support, so Judge Smith appointed counsel for them, and I was asked to represent Jason.

Unbreakable. Unredeemable. Unlovable. That was Jason. Each of the killers accused the other of being the trigger-man. I know the real truth about which one killed Monte, but I'll never tell, and it really doesn't matter. They went there together, both intending to rob the man of his drugs and money, and they knowingly took a gun into the motel room.

After months of motions hearings, investigation, negotiation, and consultation with my client, he took a plea bargain, and at just age 18, he was sentenced to 48 years in the Colorado Department of Corrections. Think about that. He would spend his young and middle adult years in prison, eligible for parole in 19 years under our State system, at age 37.

He had barely spoken to me throughout the long pendency of his case. He was a tough guy, a young thug without any care for others, without any visible remorse for his crime, without any expressed fear

for his consequence. He wasn't about to let me in to that shadow place where he lived alone with his thoughts and memories.

He stood impassively at his sentencing hearing before Judge Smith, answering questions and entering his plea with a minimum of words and little to no eye contact. His fate was sealed, and his sentence was already agreed. Judge Smith took time with him nevertheless, exhorting him to make good use of his time in prison, to get a degree and learn a trade, for someday he would be returned to society and he needed to be prepared to live responsibly on the outside of the system.

Jason said nothing when given a chance to speak. There was nothing on his heart that he cared to share. What was the point? He was getting 48 years in the Department of Corrections either way. He spoke no apology to the victim's family. He showed no appreciation to the judge that he didn't get the life sentence he was originally facing. He had nothing at all to say. He did not thank me or my defense team for the many hours we spent working for him. Unbreakable, unredeemable Jason Mayo was. That is, until we were alone with the sheriff's deputy waiting for him to be taken away.

Today's film, "The Mustang," is about a man who reminds me of Jason. Roman Coleman is a toughened convict serving out a lengthy prison sentence for the manslaughter of his woman, a crime that took

place when he was high on drugs and in the presence of his little girl. He is hardened by life and after so many years in prison, by his own admission, he is unbreakable and unredeemable. He does his time in self-imposed solitary fashion for, as he explains to the prison psychologist, "I'm not good with people." She puts him in a rehabilitation program where convicts train captured wild mustangs for sale at an auction to private buyers and police agencies.

Inmate Coleman doesn't know the first thing about ranching or horses or socializing them to accept a rider. He is assigned a particularly tough customer labeled as a "mean cuss, an angry animal, probably unbreakable." Unredeemable. Both of them.

Over the course of many weeks, man and beast challenge each other's will. Roman barely speaks when outside in the ring and when he does, he is either begging the horse, or cursing or striking him. None of these tactics have any effect other than to harden them both further. They are twin sons of different species—unbreakable, incapable of living in civilized society.

What did Jesus mean when he told Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit?" Was he talking about the formula to get to heaven after death, that only persons who profess and proclaim a reborn faith

can gain God's eternal life favor? I think this is a popular interpretation, perhaps *the* popular perception, due in large part, to the consistent theme of Evangelical Christians.

In the evangelical world, accepting Jesus Christ "as personal Lord and Savior" is the way to rebirth and guarantees the renewed Christian a place at the table in heaven. An Evangelical minister proof-texts it this way, meaning that he strings together many unrelated bible passages so as to "prove" a claim of ultimate Biblical truth:

We recognize we are sinners (Romans 3:23) and that the penalty for that sin is death (Romans 6:23). Because of our sin, we can't know and experience God's love and we are spiritually separated from Him. To remedy our situation, God sent His only Son to die in our place—to take the penalty for our sin (Romans 5:8). After Jesus' death, He rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-6). Jesus is our only way to God (John 14:6) and He gives us the gift of salvation. We can receive God's gift through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9) and experience new birth (John 3:1-8). Receiving Jesus means trusting Him to come into our lives to forgive our sins and make us what He desires.

If this is ultimate truth, I want no part of it. I'll admit it right here and now: I'm in ministry in large part to show you an alternate ultimate truth: We already know God's love. We experience it every day, even if we are too pig-headed to recognize it. We are never, ever, as Paul assures us, separated from the love of God. There is nothing we can do to chase God's love away from us. As horrible as we

sometimes are, for all the wrong we do during our lifetimes, for all the sins we list in our little black books of self-judgment, God loves us, not in spite of our humanness, but because we are part of God-Alive's Beloved, Perfectly-Flawed, Creation. We were made this way from the get-go.

One way we can look at the idea of being reborn is based in the concept of Original Sin, original shame. Barbara Brown Taylor in her fabulous book, *An Altar in the World*, describes this thinking: "God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son, but if the world had not been such a rotten place, then that Son need not have died." In other words, we are irredeemable except by violence done to a man innocent of our crimes. I just cannot buy this. I believe Jesus was called to show us how to love the unlovable, starting with our unlovable self and expanding our horizons from there. I don't buy that Jesus came to die so we could be "saved" for eternal life.

I like what UCC minister and writer Robin Meyers says in his equally brilliant book, *Saving Jesus from the Church*: "Religion is about relationship, not righteousness. [This is] because love changes everything." He says the problem with the "born again" doctrine is that within the "Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior" mantra is not "one word about how we should live, only what you should believe."

My objection to "born again" religious thinking does not mean people who are Evangelicals are shallow Christians. I just mean

to join philosopher Paul Woodruff in raising questions about leaders, especially religious leaders, "who cite reverence for what is good as their warrant for proclaiming whole populations of people evil." In my view, Christians have no corner on the God market. No one is outside of God's love, and certainly not because of either their holiness or sinfulness, *especially* since these words are merely projections on people by others.

So, when Jason Mayo and I waited in the near-empty courtroom at the end of his hearing, and he asked me quietly and without preamble if he was going to hell for what he had done, I nearly fell off my chair. He hadn't spoken 200 words to me in 10 months. I stared at him. I didn't know what to say. I hadn't been to seminary and read all these books and written all these sermons. I had no scholarly or pastoral answer for him.

He was 18. He was scared. He had broken. This was his "born again" moment. I told him, "Yes, yes you are. But whether you stay there is up to you. God loves you, so you decide who you are going to be while you are there." He was, of course, talking about the future of his soul, but that was too big a question for me then. I was talking about prison.

Jason is on parole now. After a few rough years of adjustment where he was constantly in trouble, he was referred to a dog training rehabilitation program at Colorado Territorial Correctional

Facility. The program changed Jason's life and his behavior. The unbreakable had broken. He wrote in his Petition for Clemency that he knew God had a purpose for him. Judge Smith in 2010 wrote a letter in support of his Petition, because he, too, believes no one is irredeemable.

May It Be So.