

A Scottish Frankenstein

Michael Jinkins

Exodus 34:1-10

October 25, 2020 | St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

The story goes like this: Once upon a time, in the beautiful Border country of Scotland, north of the River Tweed, two children were born to the unhappy union of the aging Laird of Dalcastle and his pious young wife Lady Colwan.*

The first son was strong and handsome. Like his father, he possessed a sort of amiable worldliness. The second son was a sullen, brooding child, resentful of his older brother's looks and easy-going nature.

The first son, George, was claimed from birth by his father, the Laird. He grew to maturity within a circle of affectionate, fun-loving friends who celebrated their youth and good-fortune in a variety of worldly pursuits. The second son, Robert, nursed his grievances, and became, like his mother, a religious fanatic.

There was one more important factor in the relationship between the brothers George and Robert. It was the subject of whispers and speculations throughout the region. Robert bore a striking resemblance, physically and emotionally, to Lady Cowan's chaplain, the Reverend Robert Wringham, after whom young Robert was named. And young Robert became utterly devoted to the chaplain and his fanatical brand of faith.

The story takes its fateful turn when young Robert meets a stranger one day named Gil-Martin. Like many religiously-inclined folks in Scotland, early in the 1800s, Robert was tormented with the most profound doubt. It came directly from the peculiar interpretation of predestination that had arisen in the centuries after John Calvin died. I've called this the devil's theology. It went like this.

It's adherents, like Robert, believed that, from all eternity, God created some people just for damnation in order to show his perfect justice in damning sinners (and all humans, according to this theology, were sinners from birth, so they had it coming, as Clint Eastwood might say). But God created others for salvation, not because of anything they did or might do, but just to demonstrate his capacity to show mercy when he chose. And, in order to save those sinners, Jesus Christ died.

According to this diabolical doctrine, God does not love all humanity, only those he chooses arbitrarily to save through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. And, according to one of the most cunning twists in this doctrine, it was possible to live one's whole life as faithfully as one could, trusting in God's mercy, even believing in Jesus Christ, without knowing whether one was among the elect. Indeed, in this theology, a faithful person could be just the object of a cruel joke on God's part, was never loved by God, and would die and go to hell.

You can imagine the spiritual torment this might cause in the hearts of Christians. And all over Scotland, in that time, theologians and preachers and lay people were struggling to figure out how to resolve the terrible uncertainty they felt over their lack of assurance of salvation. How could you ever know that you were among the elect? As I told you, it was the Devil's theology.

That's where young Robert's new acquaintance comes in. Gil-Martin convinced Robert of something Robert had always half-suspected all of his life. He was unlike all other people. He was special. He was elect. He had been born to be an instrument of God's wrath. From his childhood, under the tutelage of his mother's chaplain, he had taken immediately to the strictest tenets of this most peculiar Calvinist faith. Laws, fruit of the Spirit, the way of Jesus: none of this meant anything when it comes to election, he reasoned. Gil-Martin daily reinforced all the petty jealousies and resentments and self-righteousness Robert had long harbored, and convinced him that God had selected him to take vengeance upon sinners. And no matter what he did, as God's specially elect instrument, no matter how violent he was, how degraded he became, his sins were irrelevant.

Poor Robert, twisted and contorted from childhood by a vision of a God who had no moral compass, was easy to convince. And when the mental stresses became too great, young Robert snapped. It is then that the story becomes most murky, because we can't really tell for sure if it was Robert or Gil-Martin who committed the murders of his worldly brother and his adulterous mother, both of whom were such sinners. We cannot be sure that Gil-Martin was anything more than a figment of Robert's deranged mind, an imaginary friend. -- Or whether Gil-Martin was the Devil, using the trappings and tools of religion to destroy God's creatures. And the questions are never answered in the story, because Robert, in despair, takes his own life.

The story I've just outlined for you was written by James Hogg as a novel in the early nineteenth century. And he wrote it as a cautionary tale.

For the author, Robert was a sort of Scottish Calvinist Frankenstein. He was a creature assembled from the various parts of a dead and deadly religion. Robert's great sin, according to the author, was his low regard for the law of God. From Hogg's perspective, it is better for people to believe that God requires us to earn our salvation by following the dictates of the law than it is for them to believe that God is love, mercy incarnate, more ready to forgive than we are to repent. An emphasis on grace, according to the author of the story, is just too easy to abuse. Grace, and the freedom of the Spirit, and the assurance of faith which grace makes possible, are just too dangerous unless they are tethered to some sort of conditional acceptance by God.

I think I once told you the story of a neighboring Baptist minister in the little village where I served my first solo pastorate, the fellow who took me to task because he had heard that in our Presbyterian confirmation class, I told the young people of our church that there is

nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there's nothing you can do to make God love you less. God is love, and God wants nothing so much as to wrap you in his unconditional love. Christian ethics, morality, the fruit of the Spirit, all flow from our consciousness of the love of God, not from fear.

That minister sat facing me over a cup of Dairy Queen coffee, and he said, "You just can't say the kind of thing you said to teenagers. They need to be afraid of what God will do to them. Otherwise, you don't know what they might get up to."

My pastoral colleague was haunted by a Calvinist Frankenstein without knowing it.

Grace is a risky business. God knows this better than anyone else. But God wants the love and obedience of free human beings. And grace does not have to lead to greater sin. No, indeed. Embracing God's grace can lead us into greater grace, that unconditional love even of the unlovely and the unloved, the mercy and generosity that changes hearts and mind and lives.

There's a particular thought I want us to contemplate today. This is what I really want us to remember. *It is the love of God that constrains us, not the restraints of law. It is the love of God shared with us by the Spirit of Christ that motivates us, not fear.*

The German biblical scholar Claus Westermann, in a lecture he once presented at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, made the most interesting observation about the Torah, what we Christians know as the Law at the heart of the Old Testament. Westermann observed that the Old Testament opens with a universal orientation: the whole of creation is God's, and God loves the whole of creation, and God seeks to care for the whole of creation.

The focus of Genesis narrows and sharpens with the appearance of Abraham. But even here, in God's choosing of a particular man, a family, a tribe and a people with whom he is principally related, through whom he will work his redemption, his ultimate concern is always to bless the whole of creation, all the families of the earth. The story from Exodus through the kings of Israel concentrates on that particular relationship between God and Israel, but the larger concern of the Torah for all of creation is never lost. And, in the end, with the emergence of the great Hebrew prophets, the focus widens out again dramatically.

To put it another way, God's original intention is love, universal and comprehensive, carried forth, communicated, through a particular people, only to emerge again as a call to universal justice and rightness and mercy. When seen from this vantage point, the law is a gift of unconditional grace, meant to be used for the ends of love.

Again: It is the love of God that constrains us, not the restraints of law. It is the love of God shared with us by the Spirit of Christ that motivates us, not fear.

I have often wondered how it was possible for our little stream of the Reformation in Scotland to become so twisted in its thinking that it could no longer make the simple childlike

confession enshrined in the Bible itself: "God is love." Why had our theology become so corrupted that we could not say "God is love"? *Not* God chooses to love. *Not* God creates some humans to be among the elect whom he will love. *Not* God has a capacity to show love. No.... none of that hair-splitting that reduces God to the size of a resentful little man. What went wrong, I've often wondered, in the upbringing of the infant kirk who became the great Church of Scotland, that kept it from seeing that God wants us to share his character which is pure love?

That, of course, is a question that could launch a thousand Ph.D. dissertations. But of this we can be sure.

It is the love of God that constrains us, not the restraints of law. It is the love of God shared with us by the Spirit of Christ that motivates us, not fear.

Amen.

*The story is from James Hogg's novel, "The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner" (1824). The novel was written in the fairly typical Scots English of the period, though it lapses into the idiomatic lowland Scots in dialogue. It is truly remarkable. The narrative voices are not reliable, but the motivations of the author are known. The novel stands at the beginning of the movement which gave us gothic novels, and is squarely in the tradition of psychological gothics. But it goes much further than its siblings in the genre. In 1990 I wrote an article for the British journal *EQ* on this novel, if you ever want to read more about it. And, of course, the novel is still in print too.