

“Pelagius Was Right”

Psalm 139.1–18

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 18 September 2005

(on retreat at La Foret)

Two years ago, one of our exceedingly bright confirmation students asked me about original sin – the doctrine of the church that understands human nature as fallen: that because Adam and Eve messed up by eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge, all human beings are by nature evil and need redemption. That's one of the reasons the church began baptizing infants: because they were born with the taint of Adam's sin.

Last week, I had a woman in my office in tears when she asked me about original sin, and I replied that not only do we have no words of Jesus recorded on the subject, the words “original sin” do not occur together in the Bible...anywhere. Paul speaks of sin coming into the world “through one man” in his letter to the Romans. Paul's statement isn't so much about a mythic understanding of how sin came among us, but rather it's almost an offhand comment that points to “the free gift of grace arriving through one man,” namely Jesus.

The church over the last 1600 years has been doing a real psychological number on people by pushing Augustine's notion of original sin. But Augustine's was not the only voice speaking in the fourth and fifth centuries.

A Celtic-British monk named Pelagius arrived in Rome in the 380s with some radically different ideas. Christianity probably came to Britain with the Roman army in the second century, but it wasn't until the early fourth century that a distinctive British spirituality emerge, and its first notable theologian was Pelagius, who was likely from Ireland, but living in England. In fact, in Rome, people made fun of his Celtic tonsure, which was styled in the way druids had worn their hair: cut around the back and sides and long on the top. (Just the opposite of the Roman monastic tonsure, which looks about like the crown of my head.)

In many ways, Pelagius's letter gives us a window into the Celtic spirituality not just of the fourth century, but even today. Karl Barth (the noted neo-Orthodox theologian) quipped that the British remain “incurably Pelagian to this day.” Pre-Christian Celtic religion was concerned with the mystery and the beauty of nature, and humanity was seen as a part of nature, rather than removed from it, mastering it. And that view of wholeness keeps expressing itself in contemporary Celtic Christianity. Perhaps that's why it has experienced a resurgence over the last 50 years, especially in ecumenical communities like Iona in Scotland and Northumbria in northeast England.

But, back to Pelagius. Initially, his ideas were praised by the pope...but criticized bitterly by Augustine. Listen to these words from a letter of Pelagius and contrast them with what you've heard about original sin: “First, then, you ought to measure the good of human nature by reference to its Creator...If it is he who has made the world good, exceedingly good, how much more excellent do you suppose that he has made humanity...fashioned in his own image and likeness...Learn to appreciate the dignity of human nature.”¹ Matthew Fox, a former Dominican priest, writes not about original sin,

¹ B.R. Rees (ed.), “Letter to Demetrias,” *Letters of Pelagius and His Followers*, (Boydell, 1991), p. 29.

but about “original blessing.” Do Fox and Pelagius mean to imply that people can’t do horrific things? Of course not. They contend that it was not Adam’s fault, but our own.

Here is what Pelagius had to say about the world around him. Think for a moment what the Western world would be like if Pelagius, rather than Augustine, had carried the day: “Look at the animals roaming the forest: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God’s spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insect crawling in the grass: God’s spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent....When God pronounced that his creation was good, it was not only that his hand had fashioned every creature; it was that his breath had brought every creature to life. Look too at the great trees of the forest; look at the wild flowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God’s spirit is present within all plants as well. The presence of God’s spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful; and if we look with God’s eyes, nothing on the earth is ugly.”²

How do you clear-cut an old-growth forest if you see that God’s spirit is resident in those ancient redwoods? How do you slaughter the buffalo for sport if you sense that God is within them? How do you kill millions of Jews, gay men, Roma (or gypsies) in the Holocaust if you see them as individual and collective reflections of God’s spirit? How do you demonize Muslims and blame all of Islam for 9/11 and then attack two countries in retaliation at the cost of tens of thousands of lives?

To a newly baptized Christian, Pelagius wrote, “You will realize that doctrines are inventions of the human mind, as it tries to penetrate the mystery of God. You will realize that Scripture itself is the work of human minds, recording the example and teaching of Jesus. Thus it is not what you believe that matters; it is how you respond with your heart and your actions. It is not believing in Christ that matter; it is becoming like him.”³

If you are a Christian bishop in Rome in the fourth century, just as the empire is adopting (or co-opting) your faith, you may not be terribly impressed with Pelagius’s stands on doctrine and scripture. It might worry you if the church is not the only way to have sins remitted and eternal life guaranteed.

For me, Pelagius’s words have great resonance, not only because I take the Bible seriously but not literally, but also because we in the United Church takes the historic creeds as “testimonies of faith, not tests of faith.” I sometimes tell people that I don’t particularly care what you believe, but I do care how you nurture your relationship with God and how you live your faith.

I wish I could tell you that there was a happy ending to Pelagius’s own story, and in some ways there is. In 416, Augustine and the African bishops held two diocesan councils attacking Pelagius. In 418, he was banished from Rome by imperial decree and several months later, he was excommunicated by the Church in Rome because of his “heresy.”

The good news is that Pelagius likely returned either to his monastery in Wales or back to Ireland (which was never part of the Roman Empire and where priests married into the second millennium). In fifth century Irish commentaries on the gospels, there are

² Rob van de Weyer (ed.), *The Letters of Pelagius*, (Arthur James, 1995), p. 71.

³ *ibid.*, p. 48.

copious notations that say “PL says” or “PL states,” leading us to believe that Pelagius’s legacy lived on and lives on.

How can we approach our faith if we deny that God is at the very heart of existence? It seems to me that the church has anathematized a saint, and that we all would be better Christians...better followers of Jesus...if we listened to our brother, Pelagius.

Amen.