Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“You have searched me and you know me, O Lord” (Psalm 139).

Today’s assigned Gospel completes the portion of Matthew devoted to Jesus’ scolding of the scribes and Pharisees as hypocrites, whited sepulchers and accomplices in the murder of prophets. These acid texts hardly seem appropriate to today’s commemoration of St. Augustine of Hippo, whose severe views on sex and marriage are only part of his deep insights into his own fallen human nature and the spiritual struggles he shared in his classic *Confessions.*

Augustine captures most of us within the bookends of his famous quotes from the beginning and end of his life. Contrast a young man’s prayer: “Lord, make me good, but not now,” with his lament in old age: “Late have I loved thee.” Here was a soul in search of God trapped in a body of sensual pursuits and a brilliant mind trying to fend off the truth that was pursuing him.

The God of the Bible seems to revel in figures like Moses and David, who lived by their passions, men and women of the flesh like Jacob and Judith, the irascible Peter and the tempestuous Paul. They embodied the full range of human sin and possibility. Jesus cannot be sanitized of hurt and anger, tears and impatience, and so was able to carry the complete burden of the human condition through the cross to the resurrection as the Word incarnate.

When our lives stray into these fleshly realms, we are no less close to God than when we seem to soar above human limits in our dreams and prayers. God loves sinners as much as saints and allows suffering and failure keep us from imagined perfection that distances us from others or even from God. Life is both tragedy and comedy, and knowing both keeps us human.

If it is true, as the reading from Hebrews 12 told us last Sunday, that “those God loves he chastises and disciplines,” then Jesus must have had a special fondness for the poor scribes and Pharisees. He refused to let them hide in their pride and sheltered world of ideas and high standards no one could live up to. He engaged them as passionately as he pursued other sinners, wanting them to come to the table with the tax collectors and prostitutes to recover their own humanness.

Jesus invites us to join him there, where Augustine is the after dinner speaker and Judas Iscariot is the guest of honor.

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