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Genesis 8:20-22

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A FRAGRANT AROMA

SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS

A firestorm has raged this past week over the topic of parenting. Two weeks ago *The Wall Street Journal* published an essay by Yale law professor Amy Chua under the title, “Why Chinese Mothers Are Superior.” The essay was excerpted from her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, published three days later. To be fair to her, the *WSJ* title was not of her own choosing nor to her liking. The essay and the book have generated passionate responses, both for and against. When I last looked on Friday evening, the essay had generated over 7000 comments on the *WSJ* website, and the book already had 165 reviews on Amazon. The book generated so much attention that *Time* magazine devoted its current cover story to it. Amy Chua has had a very busy week, appearing on talk shows. On Thursday morning, for example, she was on KQED’s *Forum* in our own back yard.

How should parents set expectations for their children, and how should they respond when their children fail to meet these expectations? Tiger moms set high expectations and don’t accept failure. If their children fail to meet these expectations they make them repeat again and again and again—as long as it takes to get it right. Chua argues that too many American parents are focused on their children’s self-esteem. They lower their expectations and praise every accomplishment. They are unwilling to call failure failure, with the result that their children fail to achieve much success. At the heart of the matter is how to combine discipline and grace. Can these ever be reconciled? Can judgment and mercy live together?

Before I get into trouble here on the topic of tiger moms, let me turn attention away from Amy Chua and turn the question towards God. How does God view the children he has made? He created people for a high calling: to be his image-bearers on earth. This is why today, on Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, we pause to affirm the sanctity of human life. We’re not just a bunch of chemicals. We’re not just animals. We’re in the image of God. We have dignity. We are created for purpose. God has high expectations of us. But as we work through the early chapters of Genesis we see that within just a few generations humanity has failed spectacularly, so spectacularly that God has wiped out most of humanity in the Flood. What will his expectations be now that the Flood is over? Will he maintain his high expectations and make humanity try again until it gets it right? Or will he lower his expectations until humanity is able to meet them? Can God reconcile the opposing needs for discipline and for grace?

The Flood was precipitated by the Lord’s evaluation of humanity:

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the LORD said, “I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the

ground—for I regret that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. (Gen 6:5-8 TNIV)

The human race had blown it. It had multiplied upon the earth, as God intended, but this had only brought a multiplication of evil upon the earth. The Lord gave the human race an F-grade on every count: every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. You can’t get more comprehensive than that! Humanity was so bad that the Lord regretted, was sorry, repented that he had made them. Such language causes us discomfort, but it’s there in the text. Last summer I devoted a whole sermon to that thorny topic: does God change his mind? It was time for discipline of the harshest sort: removal from the earth. But God did this out of a pained heart.

But then there was Noah: he found favor in the Lord’s sight. He was a righteous man, blameless in his generation, and it was with God that he walked (6:9). So the Lord determined to save him and his family while destroying everyone else. Throughout the flood narrative we’ve seen that Noah never speaks; he simply does. He does everything just as the Lord commanded. He’s the perfect son. With him as the new progenitor of the human race and as the model, perhaps humanity will do better the second time around. The Lord has wiped the earth clean; it’s a *tabula rasa*, a clean slate. The people who didn’t do it right have gone. The one who is left is Noah, who has done it right. Today we see what Noah does when he emerges from the ark onto this clean slate.

Noah’s Offering (8:20)

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it. (Gen 8:20)

The first thing that Noah did was to build an altar to the Lord and sacrifice burnt offerings on it. This was not the first offering in Scripture. Cain and Abel had brought offerings to the Lord (4:3-4). Their offerings were tribute (*minhab*) offerings. They were paying homage to their Creator, recognizing that God is God and they were not, recognizing that the appropriate thing to do with their produce, whether of the field or the flock, was to offer it to God. But only one of them was really honoring God. Both presented offerings to the Lord, but only one presented himself to the Lord.

Noah’s offering was not the same as those of Cain and Abel. His offering first required that he build an altar of sacrifice, the first sacrificial altar in Scripture. Next Noah took representatives from each of the clean animals and clean birds. We now find out why the Lord had told Noah to take onboard seven pairs of each of these clean animals and birds: so that he would have clean animals for sacrifice. Many people ask how Noah knew which animals and birds were clean and which were not. The Bible does not tell us; it’s an irrelevant question; it’s not the point. More importantly, Israel for whom Genesis was written, would know which animals were clean and which were not,

for the Lord gave them detailed instructions. Everything was divided into clean and unclean. This was not a matter of hygiene or physical cleanliness; it was a matter of ceremonial purity. Only clean or pure animals and birds were suitable for sacrifice as offerings to the Lord. Noah knew this because he was a man who walked with God.

Noah offered up these animals and birds as burnt offerings, the first burnt offerings in Scripture. A burnt offering is different than the tribute offerings which Cain and Abel had brought. The Hebrew term (*olah*) means something that goes up (*alah*): the entirety of the sacrifice goes up to the Lord. The Greek term is *holocaust*, something that is completely burnt. Why did Noah offer up burnt offerings? Certainly he did so out of gratitude, but a tribute offering would have been sufficient for that. Why did it have to be burnt offerings? Noah recognized that something had to die in his place, and that it had to be wholly given over to the Lord. Noah's burnt offerings here are yet another illustration of him as a righteous man.

Noah's immediate impulse on coming out of the ark was to build an altar to the Lord. We see similar impulses in Abraham. As soon as he arrived in the land he built an altar to the Lord at Shechem (Gen 12:7). He moved on to Bethel and there also built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord (12:8). But then he went down to Egypt where, out of fear, he passed off his wife as his sister. On his return from this failure in Egypt he went back to the altar at Bethel, where he had formerly called on the name of the Lord, and he again called on the name of the Lord (13:4). The altar was like a reset button with God, setting himself right with God.

As soon as Noah came out of the ark he did the right thing. Still we don't hear him speak, we just see him act. As he has done all along he does the right thing, acting in a manner befitting his characterization as a righteous man, blameless in his generation, who walked with God. He's the good son.

The Lord's Response (8:21-22)

The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: "Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done." (8:21)

The Lord's response to Noah's burnt offerings was two-fold: he smelled and he spoke to himself.

1. A Pleasing Aroma

The Lord smelled the sacrifice that ascended. Smell is probably the most powerful of our five senses. One whiff of something can fill us with intense pleasure or make us gag. Smells can evoke powerful memories from childhood. Huge amounts of money are spent on developing scents and aromas. But smell is a rather individual matter; we respond differently and with different intensity.

The Lord smelled Noah's sacrifice as a pleasing aroma. This was a choice: he could have interpreted the aroma as a stench, but chose to accept it as soothing. Literally, it was a smell that puts at rest. Here we have another wordplay on Noah's name: Noah's sacrifice put the Lord at rest (*nuah*). The Lord chose to accept it as an aroma that put him at rest. He didn't accept the sacrifice grudgingly. Noah didn't have to twist his arm or manipulate him. In accepting the sacrifice as a pleasing aroma, God was also accepting the one making the sacrifice. He was pleased with both. He surely looked on Noah with beaming pleasure.

2. Never Again

God's second response was to make an inner determination: he spoke to his heart. His inner dialog was predicated upon the sacrifice he had just accepted as soothing, as propitiatory. He said to himself, "Never again." So resolved was he that he said it not once but twice. These two statements form a classic piece of Hebrew poetry, though no English version sets it out as poetry:

**"Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings,
And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have
done."**

The first line seems to imply that the Lord lifted the curse upon the ground, but that's not quite right. The first line should read, "I will not curse the ground any further." The Lord was promising not to intensify the curse. This curse on the ground (*adamah*) because of the man (*adam*) has been a theme running through these early chapters of Genesis since chapter 3. The parallel line explains this limitation that God was placing upon himself with respect to the curse: he will never again destroy all life. The text is starkly honest here. The destruction of life was because of human sin, but was accomplished by God. Neither of these is a popular concept today. It is politically incorrect to talk of human sin, and it is offensive to talk of God destroying life. But the Bible clearly sets out both, and both were at work in the Flood. God brought the Flood in response to human sin, and with the Flood he destroyed life. But now God said, "Never again." Why? Because he had accepted both Noah's sacrifice and Noah himself. He had allowed himself to be propitiated by Noah's sacrifice. Now the one faithful human had emerged from the ark and was ready to start over. Surely God's promise expressed his confidence that humanity would do better this time around with Noah at the helm.

God solemnized his promise with a poem:

**"As long as the earth endures,
seedtime and harvest,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
day and night
will never cease." (8:22)**

The Lord promises to keep the world running, to never again disrupt its functioning as he did with the Flood. He will shortly confirm this promise to Noah in the form of a covenant, placing his rainbow in the sky as the sign of the covenant. All seems well.

But into the middle of this pair of "never again" statements is inserted another clause, one that doesn't seem to fit:

**"...even though every inclination of the human heart is evil
from childhood..."**

This conveys a very different message. Any confidence in the ability of humanity is misplaced, even if that human is Noah. Noah is indeed a role model, but he is not the answer to humanity's problems. In the short term the answer is in God's gracious acceptance of Noah's sacrifice. But that leaves unresolved the root problem of human sin. The Flood has changed everything. It has wiped the earth clean, making it ready for a fresh start. It has destroyed all the wicked, leaving only the righteous man Noah and his family.

But the Flood has changed nothing. The condition of humanity after the Flood is no different than before the Flood. Before the Flood "every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time" (6:5). After the Flood "every inclination of the

human heart is evil from childhood.” Some do try to interpret the second statement as milder than the first, but that seems unfounded and changes the interpretation in a big way. If you read the second statement as a milder form of the first then humanity after the Flood is a little better than it was before the Flood. There is hope that humans will get their act together. If they try enough times they might actually get it right.

But if you read the statements as similar, there is no such hope. Humanity after the Flood is as evil as it was before the Flood. This means that God’s “never again” promise is not the reward for Noah’s good behavior, but an act of mercy. It is sheer grace. Something *has* changed: the Lord has been put at rest, and so he promises “never again.” Before the Flood, the evil human heart was the grounds for God’s judgment. After the Flood that same evil human heart is grounds for God’s mercy. God exercised judgment because humans were sinners. God now shows mercy because humans are still sinners.

The problem of the evil human heart is here addressed not in the heart of man but in the heart of God. He allowed his heart to be put at rest not by wiping out all those who did wrong, nor by Noah’s good behavior, but by the fragrant aroma of Noah’s sacrifices. He chose to accept Noah’s burnt offerings as a pleasing aroma, one that put him at rest. Noah’s father Lamech had named him Noah, meaning “rest,” because he was looking for comfort from the pain resulting from a cursed ground (5:29). Noah did indeed provide rest, but not in the way we were expecting. It was God who was put at rest. He allowed himself to be put at rest by Noah’s offering.

The problem of the evil human heart is still there, but God won’t address it with periodic floods. He will find another way to deal with human sin and to enable humanity to live up to his purposes. In the meantime, these dual issues of judgment and mercy meet together in the burnt offerings of Noah.

A Fragrant Aroma

Noah was not the solution to the problem of human sin. Nevertheless he was a role model, notably for Israel, whose story of origins this document is. God had high expectations for Israel, that they be holy as he is holy, that they be his chosen people, that they be a light to the nations. But they struggled with human sin. God provided them with a system of sacrifices, whereby their sins could be expiated and he propitiated. Their sins were taken away and his favor was restored, not by Israel’s obedience, for it was never perfect, but by his grace in accepting their sacrifices. Repeatedly (38 times in Exodus–Leviticus) the Lord says that he will accept these as a pleasing aroma, just as he accepted Noah’s burnt offerings.

Just weeks after entering into covenant with the Lord, promising to worship him alone, Israel broke covenant by bowing down to the golden calf, while Moses was on top of Mount Sinai with God.

“I have seen these people,” the LORD said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation.” (Exod 32:9-10)

Moses interceded, urging God to change his mind, to repent, and to remember his purposes for Israel as expressed in his covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Lord listened to Moses and he did change his mind. Moses then asked the Lord to show him his glory. The Lord hid Moses in a cleft in the rock,

And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”

Moses bowed to the ground at once and worshiped. “Lord,” he said, “if I have found favor in your eyes, then let the Lord go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wickedness and our sin, and take us as your inheritance.” (Exod 34:7-9)

Israel’s nature as a stiff-necked people was grounds for God’s judgment. But Moses called on God for it be grounds also for his mercy. This is the same principle as in the Flood. God exercises judgment because of human sin; God exercises mercy because of human sin. Each time Israel offered up burnt offerings judgment and mercy met. Judgment: it was clear that Israel had sinned; a sacrificial animal had to die. Mercy: God accepted the sacrifices as a pleasing aroma and he spared his people.

There wasn’t anything magical about the sacrifices that Israel offered up. They didn’t automatically set God at rest. It was God’s gracious acceptance of these that set himself at rest. He accepted them as a pleasing aroma, showing mercy, withholding judgment. But he didn’t always accept Israel’s sacrifices. When Israel forgot the interconnection between judgment and mercy, when they took the sacrifices for granted, the Lord smelled their offerings as a stench. In the days of Isaiah he told Israel that he had no pleasure in their meaningless offerings, that their incense was an abomination, and that he hated their religious ceremonies (Isa 1:11-15). Nothing had changed in the offerings themselves. Physically, the same smell was ascending to heaven, but God now smelled it as a stench not as a pleasing aroma. Israel had forgotten the connection between judgment and mercy that met in their burnt offerings. Far from setting him at rest the smell aroused his wrath. Just like Cain before, Israel was presenting its offerings but not itself. Nevertheless, the Lord immediately said,

**“Come now, let us reason together...
Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red as crimson,
they shall be like wool.” (Isa 1:18)**

The Lord has lofty purposes for humanity, yet humanity is chronically unable to meet these purposes. How does God solve this parenting conundrum? He does not lessen his purposes, nor does he whitewash over human failure, calling it success in order to give a passing grade. God solves this in two stages, both of which involve a fragrant aroma. Firstly, he has accepted another sacrifice as a fragrant aroma:

Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. (Eph 5:2 NASB)

God has accepted his Son’s sacrifice of himself. He allowed it to put him at rest in a far deeper way than Noah’s burnt offerings or Israel’s burnt offerings could ever do. It put him at rest once and for all, no further sacrifice needed. Jesus didn’t have to twist God’s arm, didn’t have to try to manipulate him. God was pleased to accept him and his offering. God beams with pleasure upon his son, just as he beamed with pleasure upon him when he was on earth: “This is my

son, whom I love, in whom I am well pleased.” In Jesus God’s judgment and God’s mercy meet.

God has allowed himself to be set at ease by the fragrant aroma of his Son’s sacrifice. But this still doesn’t change the problem of human sin. The second stage is that God causes the fragrant aroma of Christ to flow through us, so that we become to him the pleasing aroma of Christ. Paul uses this imagery of the fragrant aroma to describe our life:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. (2 Cor 2:14-16)

There is something shocking here. Paul uses the imagery of a Roman triumphal procession. After a great victory, the Roman Senate would award the victorious general a triumph, a procession through the streets of Rome to wide acclaim. With him would be both his victorious troops and the conquered foe. Many used to assume that Paul is numbering himself among Christ’s victorious troops. But it is increasingly recognized that Paul numbers himself among the conquered foe. This is reflected in the change from “thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ” (NIV) to “thanks be to God, who always leads us *as captives* in Christ’s triumphal procession” (TNIV).

We were not on the side of the conquering hero. When we take our place among the conquered foe we acknowledge that we were Christ’s enemies not his friends. We were worthy of judgment and in us God has exercised judgment. But he has also exercised mercy because of our sin. Judgment and mercy meet in our baptism: dying to the old in judgment, rising to the new in mercy. Then and only then do we ourselves become to God the pleasing aroma of Christ. The aroma that we are is the aroma of the knowledge of God that is spreading everywhere through Christ. God makes himself known through Christ in whom judgment and mercy meet. It is this aroma of the knowledge of God in Christ that brings life. It is when we’ve been captured by Christ that God can deliver us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light and life. In that kingdom of life Christ lives out his life through us and God empowers us through his Spirit. As we become more and more like Christ, we become people who are more and more deeply pleasing to God. Not because we do or say the right things or offer the right sacrifices, but because we become increasingly like the Lord Jesus Christ, who has set the pattern for what it means to be truly human, who has shown what God wants us to be.

God doesn’t lower his expectations of what he wants us to be: his purpose is still that we be his image-bearers. He wants us to be nothing less than fully human after the pattern of Jesus. And he doesn’t lower his standards: he’s not afraid to call sin sin, to call failure failure.

In Christ his judgment and his mercy perfectly meet. They did so in the Flood, they did so in Israel, they do so supremely in Christ, and they do so in us when we take our place among the conquered foe in the triumphal procession.

People usually look at the Flood as being a story of great judgment. There is judgment, but at the end it’s a story of great mercy. God showed mercy because humanity after the Flood was as sinful as before the Flood; he accepted Noah’s burnt offerings as a fragrant aroma. He showed mercy to Israel because they were as stiff-necked after the golden calf as before it; he accepted their burnt offerings as a fragrant aroma. He shows us mercy because we desperately need it, because we are sinful people. Thanks be to God that he accepted Christ’s self-offering as a fragrant aroma. Now through us he spreads abroad the aroma of Christ, which is the knowledge of God.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom judgment and mercy meet; the love of God, who was pleased to accept his Son’s self-sacrifice as a pleasing aroma; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, who is God’s power at work in us to make us the people who meet his expectations, be with us all now and forevermore. Amen.

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