

“We’re All In This Together”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)
A Reflection for the First Sunday of Lent.

Romans 6:1-10

February 18, 2018

Read the Scripture by clicking [here](#).

There is an idea out there. It goes like this: *“Want to be happy? Get the toxic people out of your life.”*

A satire website, called *The Babylon Bee*, got hold of this. They made up a news story on this “toxic people” theme.¹

God Decides to Cut All Toxic People Out of His Life; 7.5 Billion Dead

In a fresh start for the year, the Almighty recently decided to cut all the negative, toxic people out of his life . . . resulting in every single person on the planet perishing at once. . . .

After browsing a . . . blog on relationship advice, God decided it was finally time to take a stand for His personal boundaries and no longer allow negative influences into his thought life. . . . [God] just really needed to spend a little more time on self-care, not giving any toxic people the time of day anymore.

Remember. This is made-up satire. Yet good satire points to truth. The “toxic people” part, that’s true. It’s me, you, and everyone.

The rest? . . . Thank God! God does not cut us out. Instead of “self-care,” in Jesus God self-gave, for us. More than giving us “toxic people” the time of day, God entered into the dark of our night.

I’m going to be talking about toxic stuff. As I do, remember this: *Jesus saves us from our toxicity, and he is making us right!* We can face the toxic stuff without fear. Why? *Jesus saves us, and he is making us right!*

¹ <http://babylonbee.com/news/god-decides-cut-toxic-people-life-7-5-billion-dead/>

II

Harry Crews was born in the Depression. He grew up in a one-room shack, at the end of a dirt road, in rural Georgia. Harry's father died when he was two. His stepfather would pull out his shotgun and threaten the family. Harry got polio. He was badly scalded when he fell into boiling water. Harry survived. He grew up and became a writer.²

Harry wrote novels, and he wrote a memoir about his first six years of life, in that end-of-the-road community.³ It's all He wrote about the Sears catalogue. They'd get their hands on one. Harry and his best friend Willalee would consume the pictures of things they did not have, and lives they could never imagine.

Harry wrote this:

*Nearly everybody I knew had something missing, a finger cut off, a toe split, an ear half chewed away, an eye clouded with blindness. . . . But the people in the catalogue had no such hurts. They were not only whole, . . . they were also beautiful.*⁴

Even where they still have a Sears now, they don't make the catalogue any more.⁵ But we don't need the catalogue, right? More than then, we are peddled pictures and sold stories about "the more-perfect life" others have. We think we can get that life for ourselves, and become slaves to that desire. Or, we resign ourselves that we never will, and become slaves to despair and resentment.

But Harry was a smart boy. He realized something. Listen.

*Under those fancy clothes there had to be scars, there had to be swellings, and boils of one kind or another because there was no other way to live in the world. And . . . I had decided that all the people in the catalogue were related, not necessarily blood kin, but knew one another, and because they knew one another there had to be hard feelings, trouble between them off and on, violence, and hate between them as well as love.*⁶

Six-year-old Harry, he knew truth. But remember: *Jesus saves us, and he is making us right!*

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/29/books/review-harry-crews-a-childhood-memoir.html>

³ Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 1995).

⁴ Quoted in Rutledge, 198.

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sears#Decline_and_Sears_Holdings. Sears' Canadian branch closed its operations in 2018.

⁶ Quoted in Rutledge, 198. Emphasis added.

III

“Because there was no other way to live in the world,” Harry wrote. Scars, and swellings, and boils. Hard feelings, trouble between us, violence and hate. All that toxic stuff.

The Season of Lent focuses us on the toxic stuff. We all live in it. We all make it.

But Jesus saves us for our toxicity, and makes us right!

Lent began on Wednesday. Ash Wednesday is when many Christians receive a mark of ashes on their foreheads. You might have done that. We’re doing it this morning too, because the ashes are a gift.

We’re marked with ashes. Ashes are a physical way of facing the toxicity. We are born into it, all of us. We cannot escape it, any of us. It’s a poison, enough of which seeps into everything, to make everything at least a bit deadly. It’s a power that gains control with dreams and lies. It’s a rebellion against God’s goodness, against God’s grace. It marches through, taking us over and sweeping us along. We don’t have a choice, but we do join up willingly. We are conscripted, and we are complicit.⁷

But keep remembering: Jesus has saved us, and he is making us right!

We’re marked with ashes. Ashes are about grief: grief that we have wounded others; grief that others have wounded us; grief over the evil that stalks our world, the evil that twists people, that twists relationships, that twists communities, that twists organizations, that twists nations, that twists churches, that twists creation.

We’re marked with ashes. Ashes are a gift. They are about being honest about the toxic stuff. I don’t know about you, but for me that’s a relief. We do the ashes in worship. We are in God’s presence, always, and here we are so mindful of that. With God I cannot fake that I am fine. And I do not have to. With God, I cannot pretend away the poison. And I don’t have to.

⁷ C. S. Lewis was right: *“Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms.”* Mere Christianity (London: Collins, 1952, 1988), 49.

IV

We're marked with ashes. Ashes in the shape of Jesus' cross.

Jesus saves us from the toxicity. Jesus is making us right!

We must grieve the toxicity. We can repent of how we are toxic and act toxically. But that is not enough.

God has done enough.

In Jesus, God invaded toxicity's realm, and broke the rebellion.

Jesus did it, but not by harming. That's the toxic way. Jesus did it by healing, with love.

Not by revenge and retribution. That's the toxic way. Jesus did it by forgiving and reconciling, with love.

Not by deception. By truth, with love.

Not with more poison. By curing the infection, with love.

Not by covering up. By revealing, with love.

Not by violence. By peace, with love.

Not by denial. By the costly grace of justice and mercy, of love.

Not by crushing. By letting himself be crushed, out of love.

Not by death. Except his death.

Love.

Jesus has saved us from our toxicity. Jesus is making us right!

This is our hope. We are his delight.

Wearing this cross of ashes says we are all in this together. Our toxicity. His salvation!

The Good News of Jesus. Amen.