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The Jesus Way | Reveal

Romans 1:1-17

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Which would you rather be... a baby kitty or a baby monkey? We're not talking a toddler kitty or a toddler monkey... we're talking baby kitty or a baby monkey? Ok, decided? Now there is a catch... as a baby kitty or baby monkey you find yourself in a life or death situation. The most harrowing and dangerous national geographic, animal planet, discovery channel – lions, tigers, bears and crocodile situation you could ever think of. Would your answer be different?

There is always a catch... we see this also in our religious and spiritual imagination. Our scripture starts with a creation story where God creates and at every step of the way calls it good. Calls creation good... calls the day, the night, the land, the water, the animals and the people good. And then it may feel like it goes down hill after that. Humanity messes up. The focus is all of humanity... all people... and then scripture abruptly narrows to focus on one family, one group of people founded by Abraham. And the creator's focus seeks to put skin and bones on a new way of living. A way of living that holds up to the original claim of goodness. This meant worship only the creator – so your heart doesn't wander off into weird places, stay in good place... it meant take care of yourself and your family... don't hurt each other... don't steal, kill or even think about stealing or killing. It meant care for those who could not care for themselves. It meant don't create an oppressive economic system. Live up to the good name you were given.

This family, that grew into a nation... tries and sometimes succeeds, but lots of times, some would argue most of the time, fails. And the creator, time and time again calls the people back. And you would think there would be a catch and there seems to be a major catch, right? Because what does the creator say – I will be your God and you will be my people. And here is where we might think is the catch – sounds like some kind of transaction is going to take place... but in each instance of this phrase there isn't and if – catch. We are used to the "if" catch right. "If" you come to this 3 hour presentation then you will get free tickets. Time and time again God simply says... I will be your God and you will be my people. Even when you don't live up to your good name. It almost seems like... *especially* when you don't live up to your good name.

It is so hard for us to accept this though. We always think there is a catch... because for us... free is rarely if ever free. Even when we've created something and called it good. Here is an example.

A couple of years ago, I am up at University of Northwestern in Roseville MN with my daughter Hallie for some soccer training. And as I am hanging out a student comes by and asks if she could sit – physically distant – on another bench. I say no big deal and a small conversation breaks out. She is from Nigeria – I have Nigerian heritage. So that was fun. And then she asks me if I was a professor at the school – no – I tell her I am a pastor at Resurrection in Woodbury. I could tell that sparked her interest and after a few more questions she asked me if I could share with her my decision date – which if you don't know that means – it means when did I make a decision for

Christ. Or maybe a finer point – when did I decide to become saved. Now I know that this university is on the more conservative Christian side, which is fine, I'm not out to battle anyone, but when I gave her my answer she very nicely decided she wanted to battle me. My answer to that question – as I've been asked that many, many times by my more conservative brothers and sisters – is "everyday". I decide every day to live by faith – not in order to earn salvation but to respond to God's saving action towards me. God has called out to me I love you and I seek everyday to respond with "I love you too".

Well, this didn't sit well with her as she has been taught and has experienced that the decision to be saved doesn't isn't Gods to make – the cross of Jesus means nothing – resurrection never had to happen because the decision to be saved it sits with each and every individual choice. She is living with a catch – and the catch is that God loves you but you have to decide to accept it. There is always a catch right. Again, I wasn't interested in that moment to argue or battle – even though she wanted it. I was only interested in creating space for her to share what is a popular yet terrifying relationship with God. A relationship not founded on love or grace but on the law, and ones own ability to live accordingly.

Unpack baby monkey vs baby kitten.

And this is where the gift of the Apostle Paul comes to us. Paul... who once was a decision theology guy. The law of his own decisions tethered him tenuously to God, according to his own ability. Who had a

monumental theological experience that would lead him to write verses like...

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith." (Rom 1:17 NRS)

The righteous don't live by the law of a decision – a calendar event – but by faith which is a daily – what Luther calls – a daily dying and rising with Jesus. God is not just revealed in a past event – but through faith God is revealed in many ways each and every day. And here is the catch... Paul is not only going to tell us that the gift of faith is central, but the very gift of faith comes from God. Just like you can't earn God's love you can't earn faith. That's the catch... baby kitten anyone?