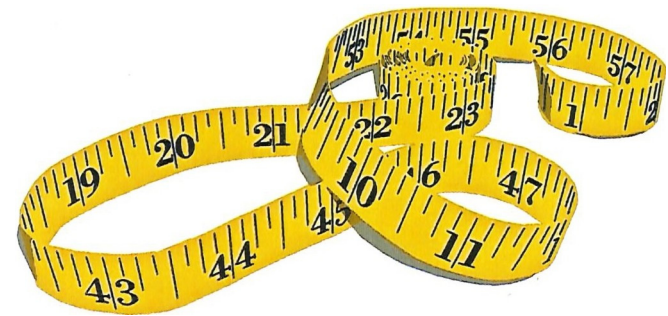


# THE TAPEWORM



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19/11/16



Then came the shocking news: "I love you because you breathe."

That thought seared through my brain.

"That's what I want you to tell others. That's the good news that heralds the beginning of healing and change in their lives. What they choose to do with my love is their story, not yours, and it is between them and me. You have enough to be going on with in your own life. All I want you to do is listen and love. Warn, if necessary, but honour their freedom to choose. And always try to love and affirm them."

That dose of good medicine saw the beginning of my letting go of my tape worm, and I am much more healthy because of it. I can now see how blessed I have been by God, and my gratitude has grown. Before, I felt that I had somehow earned these blessings (though I would never have admitted that). Now I can truly relax into wonder and thanksgiving for God's great and merciful gifts.

And Scripture has taken on new meaning. All the passages I skipped over now leap out at me - how Jesus ate with sinners (tax collectors and prostitutes), and how the 'righteous' were scandalised by it.<sup>1</sup> I could identify with those Scribes and Pharisees, but it was to my shame, not my honour.

The next Sunday I sought out that woman to apologise. Then I sat with her as she poured out her frustrations and fears. I felt honoured and humbled that she trusted me with her story.

That was about a year or so ago. She has since given birth to twins, a boy and a girl. They are being baptised next Sunday, and guess what - I have been asked to be one of the Godparents.

Is God good or what?!

Until lately, one of my favourite cartoons is of Noah and one of his sons standing on the deck of the ark. Noah's son says to him, "I still think it's unfair that I should have *both* that tapeworms." I used to laugh at that, until I realised that I too had a tapeworm. Oh, not the kind that Ham (or Shem or Japheth) carried. No. This is more a tape *measure* worm. That might seem quite benign, but believe me, it's just as debilitating as the parasite.

For one thing, its appetite is formidable. Like the real thing, it can never be satisfied. Also it eats away at its host.

Let me explain.

As a Christian, committed to Christ, I have always strived to be righteous in God's eyes. I hated sin in all its forms, and I built up an edifice of rules to make sure that I knew exactly what to look for in my behaviour that went against the law of God and avoid it assiduously. But my tape worm demanded more. Since I carried this measuring device, it demanded that I size up others to determine how they shaped up in the eyes of God. Those rules quickly became the 'norm', and conformation to the 'norm' was obviously required to lead a good Christian life. After all, it was an accurate demonstration of one's love for God. I never shirked in my duty to tell these people what God thought about their lapses. That was a clear indication of my love for them too, in that I cared for their spiritual welfare.

Consequently, I felt very good about myself. My sins were minimal, and easily dispensed with in the confession we recited each Sunday as part of the Mass, and I was sure that God approved of me and loved me because of my conscientious striving for the standard I thought he demanded of me. Although, if I had been honest, there was a sort of background uneasiness that reared its ugly head each time I chided someone for their refusal (not inability - heaven forbid! We are all responsible for our behaviour towards God!) to conform. However, I told myself that this uneasiness was simply the Tempter trying to trick me into relaxing my standards.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 5:29-32

I should have seen the other signs - for instance, Scripture : *'Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, .....'*<sup>2</sup> etc., etc. Or: *'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.'*<sup>3</sup> - but it seems that the hunger my tape worm generated overrode my ability to apply these words to my life. It simply demanded perfection in all things and at all times.

I think the crunch came when I felt I had to speak to one young woman in our congregation. She and her husband had been trying to have children for many years, and eventually they opted for IVF. Now I happen to believe that IVF is unnatural and against God's laws, and, drawing her aside after church one day, told her so.

"Unnatural?" she said angrily, "Unnatural?! What exactly does that mean?"

"What do you mean, 'what does that mean'? It should be obvious." I said.

"Well it isn't to me. Does it mean that I'm a second rate Christian? Does it mean that I'm down there with homosexuals that you delight to send to hell? Does it mean that because God hasn't blessed me with children he doesn't love me as much as you; you, with your husband and three children? What?"

She was in tears.

I was stunned. I'd never really thought deeply about it before. I was confronted by the depth of her emotions. Deep emotions were something I rarely considered in others. It got in the way of clean cut obedience. I suddenly realised that there was a human being in there, not just a subject of my zeal.

"Do you know, I've worshiped in this congregation for years." She went on, "You all think that my desperate need for children is nicely satisfied with teaching Sunday school and looking after *your*

children. Well it isn't. Oh I love your kids; they're wonderful, but you have no idea what it's like watching other women get pregnant and being fussed over when they bring their babies to church for the first time, and having them baptised." By this time she was weeping copiously. "I don't know whether IVF is natural or not. But I do know that Jesus knows my heart and hears my prayers. *You* never asked about how I felt deep down. *You* never bothered to get to know me. Not really. You simply judged me. You were never prepared to simply listen and love, like him."

Her words stung me. But I was also beginning to feel an unfamiliar emotion - compassion.

"I'm sorry." I stammered. "I didn't realise....." I felt inadequate, tongue tied.

"No," she said, "You didn't." and turned away.

The next time I went before God (that very day - it couldn't wait) it was with deep uncertainty. The strong foundations of my faith were crumbling. I felt very insecure, as if everything I had ever held dear was being stripped away from me. I argued ('But all these things *are* sinful, aren't they?') and wept ('Have I been wrong all along? What will happen if I let go of my standards, my tapeworm?') until eventually I came to a place of stillness, where words were useless, and only listening would suffice.

A question formed itself in my head. "Do you know why I love you?"

I couldn't rely on perfection any more - at least I'd come that far - and all the biblical doctrines I chose to live by seemed to pale into insignificance against this fierce reality. So all I could say was, "I don't know. I'm not what I thought I was. I don't deserve it."

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 18:9-14

<sup>3</sup> John 3:17