

Anyone who's seen 4 and 5-year-olds play tee-ball can relate to the story I am about to share, from a man named, Bill Harley:

On one team there was a girl I'll call Tracey. She wasn't very good. [Let's just say she wasn't a natural athlete.] When she ran, it was in a loping, carefree way, with one leg pulling after the other, and one arm wind-milling wildly in the air.

*Everyone in the bleachers cheered for Tracey, regardless of what team their own child played for. In all the games Tracey played, she **never hit the ball**, not even close. Sometimes, after ten or eleven swings, Tracey hit the tee and the ball would fall six inches in front of the home plate. Tracey's coach would yell "Run! Run!" and Tracey would lope off to first, clutching the bat in both arms.*

In the last game of the season, Tracey came up to bat, and through some fluke, or in a nod to the law of averages, she creamed the ball. She smoked it right up the middle as 17 players dodged the ball when it headed over 2nd base into center field. And once it reached there, there was no one to stop it (because there's usually no need for outfielders in tee-ball).

Tracey hit the ball and stood at home, watching. "Run!" yelled her coach. All the parents stood and screamed, "Run, Tracey, run!" Tracey turned and smiled into the stands, and then happy to please, galumphed off to first base. The first base coach waved his arms 'round and 'round. "Keep going, Tracey! Go!" Happy to please, she headed to second. By the time she was halfway to second, seven members of the opposing team reached the ball and were busily passing it amongst themselves as Tracey continued.

The ball began to make its long circuitous journey towards home plate, passing from one side of the field to the other. Tracey headed to third as adults fell out of the bleachers. "Go, Tracey, go!" Tracey reached third and stopped, but her coach stood at home plate calling her to run as the ball passed over the

first baseman's head and landed in the opposing team's empty dugout. "Come on, Tracey! Get a home run!"

Tracey started for home, and then IT happened.

During the pandemonium, no one noticed that a geriatric mutt had settled itself down in front of the bleachers five feet from the third-base line. As Tracey rounded third, the old dog, awakened by the screaming, sat up and wagged its tail. Its tongue hung out, mouth pulled back in an unmistakable canine smile, and Tracey stopped, right there; halfway home, 30 feet from a home run.

Falling to his knees behind home plate, her coach pleaded, "Come on Tracey! Come on home!" The crowd cheered, "Run, Tracey, run!" Tracey looked at the adults in the stands, and at her own parents shrieking, catching the whole thing on video.

Tracey looked at the dog. The dog wagged its tail.

Tracey looked at her coach. She looked at home. She looked at the dog.

Everything went to slow motion as she went for the dog! There was a moment of complete, stunned silence. And then, perhaps not as loud, but deeper, longer, and more heartfelt, everyone applauded as Tracey fell on her knees and hugged the dog.

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*As she rounded towards home Tracey had two roads before her: 1.) the road of rules and expectations that leads to victory, glory, and adulation, 2.) the other road, the road of love. And most of us, we go for the safe, predictable road of rules and expectations, believing that it's the righteous and devout thing to do. And generally that's true, **except when the other road is love**. And when it comes to love, God is more like Tracey than like us...*

God is a scofflaw when it comes to choosing between the rules and love.

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People who work in law enforcement, as I did 3 decades ago, use the word “recalcitrant” to refer to criminals who are unable to reform their behavior to accepted norms. The dictionary definition of recalcitrant is: “Resisting authority or control; not obedient or compliant; hard to deal with, manage or operate.” No, God is neither obedient nor compliant even when it comes to the rules of the universe!

On Christmas Eve we gather to tell the story of divine recalcitrance; God’s blatant disregard for the laws of the universe, who for the sake of love, dropped to one knee to embrace us in the love of a child. The doctrine of the incarnation marks God as a cosmic rule breaker.

And one reason we say that Jesus is divine, is precisely his refusal to tread the path of rules and expectations; his refusal to adhere to the status quo. Demonstrating divine recalcitrance, Jesus chooses the path of love.

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Every time Jesus’ disciples started establishing rules – no children near Jesus; don’t let the crowd touch Jesus; don’t talk to Samaritan women; don’t let people waste expensive perfume – Jesus tells them to just knock it off. (Yaconelli) It was Jesus who touched lepers, against the rules. It was Jesus who broke the Sabbath, against the rules. It was Jesus who forgave people their sins, against the rules. It was Jesus who hung out with tax collectors and prostitutes, against the rules.

The religious leaders accused Jesus of breaking the rules over and over again and Jesus is eventually tried and convicted of being a recalcitrant, irredeemable criminal. Unable to atone for his reckless disregard of the rules, Jesus’ recalcitrance was a capital offense.

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Tonight, we celebrate how Mary and Joseph and yes! even God, refused to walk the road of rules and expectations, and chose instead the path of love. Tonight, as we remember this

story, let us pray we’d have the imagination and courage to emulate God’s divine recalcitrance, for love’s sake. For God’s sake, let us always endeavor to choose the path of love. Amen.