

Cracking Eggs

As we have seen over these last many months, Luke's gospel is filled with parables by Jesus.

Parables are not sweet stories nor are they like Aesop's Fables: a story with a good, common sense, moral lesson.

Instead, the parables that confront us each and every Sunday are intended to crack us open, something like cracking the shell off of hard boiled eggs, so we can get to the good stuff inside.

It's good to remember that no single parable sums up all of our faith, rather, think of each parable as a single cracking of the egg; it's the cumulative effect of all those parables, all that cracking, that let's us get to the good stuff inside, that lets us get to the soft underbelly of our vulnerability, to our childlike nature, to that place where we can let go and let God be God, no matter the situation.

Today's cracking involves a story of the holy man and the crook, and it forces our attention on perhaps the most difficult crossroads that faithful, churchgoing people encounter: it is the crossroads of being good and being justified.

This is a tough place to be, and the examination Jesus asks each of us to make, so searchingly, so thoroughly, so fearlessly, can be a frightening thing indeed.

What makes this crossroads so hard is that being good is what we're trained to do from the day we arrive from our mother's womb.

We are taught not to lie, to be kind, not to take what isn't ours and to be respectful of our elders.

In short, we are taught to be good, which makes Jesus' parable all the more a sock in the eye; particularly to good folks like us, who are faithful and generous and responsible.

After all, the Pharisee in today's parable is the paragon of virtue; even though to us the word Pharisee has come to mean nothing more than a "hypocrite," in Jesus' day and to Jesus' crowd, to be a Pharisee is to be the very definition of what most of us consider to be a good person.

And why not?

Just listen to the description Jesus gives us of this fine fellow!

Cracking Eggs

My goodness, he's faithful to his wife and he gives 10% of everything that comes into his house back to God as a tithe.

Even though he's required to fast only once a year, (during the time of the Atonement), he fasts twice a week, a sure sign of significant discipline.

He is honest and trustworthy and grateful to God for all he has been blessed with.

And I ask you, what parish priest isn't rolling out the red carpet for this fine man?

Who doesn't want this guy in their congregation and on their vestry?

Now contrast this fine fellow with Guido the tax collector.

You want to hear about rotten?!

Look no further than Guido the tax collector.

He collaborates with Iran, or is it Rome?; he makes his living by sticking it, illegally and immorally, to his own people, because he keeps whatever he can collect above and beyond what he owes to the Roman occupiers.

In short, he's a combination strong arm man, loan shark and corrupt IRS agent all rolled into one smelly mess.

He's not good at all.

But he goes home justified.....and the good man does not.....

What are you talking about Jesus?

What are you driving at Jesus?

How dare you, Jesus, give the president of the Rotary Club a punch in the nose while kissing the cheek of the local small time crook?

It seems so unfair.

It IS unfair!

Cracking Eggs

But maybe, just maybe, Jesus is taking us back, way back, to a place where, for a while, all was beautiful, back to that place where, after awhile, it all fell apart -- in other words, maybe Jesus is taking us back to the garden so that we might remember how it is that we got to where we are now, and with that discovery, find the desire to be changed.

Back in the garden, everything was given to our parents, Adam and Eve, everything to enjoy, to love, to immerse themselves in.....

Everything, that is, except for one thing, the one forbidden thing, the one thing that is kapu, taboo, cursed for them, cursed for us.

And do you remember what that one thing is?

Let me quote it for you, from the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis:

“God commanded the Man, “You can eat from any tree in the garden, except from the Tree-of-Knowledge-of-Good-and-Evil. Don’t eat from it. The moment you eat from that tree, you’re dead.” Gn 2:16-17.

Of course, we all know how that worked out.

Our parents indeed eat, consuming the knowledge of good and evil, deciding that rather than leaving judgments about what is good and what is evil to God, they themselves shall now decide, as we now decide, what is good and what is evil.

And that tragic decision becomes the downfall of humanity: everyone deciding for herself what is good, and what is evil.

No wonder we call it original sin.

It infects us all, in every circumstance of life.

It is the root cause of Nell and Mary gossiping over the back fence (because we only gossip about those who are messing up, at least from our point of view); it is the root cause of all destructive pride (because I can only be superior if someone else is inferior); it is the root cause of all nationalism and patriotism and wars (because we the good must stand up to those evil doers over there); and it is the root cause of our Pharisee, standing today in the temple, thanking God for not making him like this pile of human debris called a tax collector.....

Cracking Eggs

Yes, today, Jesus takes us all back to the beginning, so that we might find the willingness to give back to God, once and for all, the power to say what is good and what is evil.

How can we do that? Just listen.

“Judge not, and you will not be judged,” Jesus says.

“Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you,” Jesus says.

“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother or sister” St. Paul says.

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him,” says St. John.

A fellow once said: “We don’t see things as they are, we see things as we are.”

In other words, every thing and every one we encounter, we encounter through the distorted lenses of our own experience, our own bias’, prejudices, fears and hopes and dreams.

And because of that, we are not, and we never have been, from the very beginning, equipped to judge the difference between good and evil.

We weren’t created to perform that chore; and as we ever so insistently try to do it, what we find over and over again, is that we fall flat on our collective face.

Today, God asks us to look at ourselves not through our own eyes, or through our neighbors eyes, not even through our enemies eyes.

Today’s parable does the unthinkable, it asks us to see ourselves through God’s eyes, through the eyes of the only One qualified to say what is good and what is evil.

And that is a terrifying request.

Terrifying because we so often define who we are based on the approval we get from other people.

Cracking Eggs

Terrifying because of the countless hours spent dressing up in front of the mirror of other folks' opinions, hoping to avoid the nightmare of showing ourselves to be naked and vulnerable.

Today's parable hurts because it insists that our true condition, like our parents in the garden, is nakedness; not the tuxedos or gowns we wear to impress one another.

That's why Guido is justified and the Pharisee isn't.

Guido knows what he is; the Pharisee doesn't.

When God refuses to justify the self-justifying Pharisee and instead justifies the naked Guido, God is saying to you, to me, that "we will never be free until we are dead to the whole business of justifying ourselves," and dead to the whole business of judging others. Capon, Parables of Grace, 343, paraphrased.

For weeks now we have reflected on the character of God's mercy.

We've done it with unjust stewards and corrupt judges, lost sheep, lost coins, and lost children; and even with pesky widows.

Today, the focus comes home to you and I.

Now the question is: "What is the character I need to receive God's mercy?"

And the answer, it seems, may be this:

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

"Blessed are those who know they are lost, God has already found them."

"Blessed are those who delight in the unfair, upside down generosity of God, they will share in it as well."

Jesus is the new Adam precisely because he makes us a new creation.

Jesus takes from us that deadly fruit of the knowledge of good and evil, giving it back to God, who alone knows how to exercise such power.

Cracking Eggs

And in its place, Jesus helps us to come to grips with the reality of our circumstances.

That reality is something like this:

We are all dead.

Oh sure, we're running around just fine today.

But no one gets out of this life alive.

So if we live this life under a sure sentence of death, there is no preening, no good works, no nothing we can do on our own to beat death.

Only the God who raises the dead can beat death.

And resurrection is not something that can be bargained for or deserved.

It is a gift.

What the tax collector brings are empty hands that only God can fill.

By admitting he is dead, he becomes open to the grace of God.

The Pharisee, however, comes to pray with hands that are full; full of his own efforts; his own judgments; his own sense of entitlement.

There is no place in those full hands for mercy, for grace.

"Only when you are finally able, like the tax collector, to admit that you are dead -
- only then can you stop running from grace.

It is, admittedly, a terrifying step to acknowledge that you are dead.

You will cry and kick and scream before you take that step because it means putting yourself out of the only game you know, the game of justifying yourself and judging others.

For your comfort though, I can tell you three things:

It is only one step;

Cracking Eggs

It is not a step out of reality into nothingness, it is a step from fiction into fact;

And it will make you laugh out loud at how short the trip home is, in fact, it isn't a trip at all; you're already there." Id.

Only now, you have the eyes to see it.

amen+