

## Something New

Every so often, ever since Lent, we've talked about the central problem that eats at the heart of every single human being, that problem that the writer of the Book of Genesis so brilliantly sees when she identifies the moment we become separated from God.

That moment, this brilliantly insightful woman comes to see, is the moment when we secretly, and without permission, steal, and then eat the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil.

Once that fateful bite is taken, humanity, as the theologians say, is in deep doo-doo.

Our efforts to tell the difference between good and evil, to decide who is right and who is wrong, is an ability we tend to exercise quite badly; because we fail to recognize our own innate brokenness; our own blindness, our own limited, shadowy, and uncertain vision of the who and what and wherefore of each other, and even more so, of God.

Now, I hadn't planned on bringing the subject up again, at least not for a long while, until I got this call and an invitation to breakfast, and the whole problem of telling good from evil, right from wrong, as the centerpiece of human messiness and messed-up-ness, well, it has insisted on coming back for more.

And not only that, on this day of Pentecost, Jesus brings the whole subject up himself, so, you see, even if I didn't want to talk about it, we have to talk about it.

First, the breakfast....to which an old acquaintance from my lawyer days invited me.

This lawyer told me he's talking with a bunch of community leaders because he is on a mission.

"What might that mission be," I asked?

"Well, he said, after 40 years of practicing law, I have come to a conclusion."

"Which is that the root problem with human beings, from the smallest sibling rivalry to the conflicts that have taken us right to the brink of nuclear war, is that people are very poor at deciding what is right and what is wrong: people are constantly tripping over what is good and what is evil, because they can't seem to see that when they are making those judgments, they are looking through lenses that don't focus very well at all: the lenses of their own past experience, the lenses of their own need to be right, to justify, to be the good guy."

And so, he's telling me, his mission in these later years of his life is to get as many folks as possible in the community to sign a solemn pledge that if they ever are in a position to sue, (and it's a rule in America that you can't die unless you've sued or been sued at least once!) – they will first agree to mediate, to sit down and try to find a win-win solution, which is so different from how our courts work, what with "winner take all" – the loser getting the rotten egg.

That this Jewish lawyer stumbled across what we have been stumbling across stunned me!

He brilliantly discovered what the author of Genesis brilliantly discovered.....this core problem that infects the heart of humanity: the knowledge of good and evil; a knowledge we were never equipped to handle in the first place.

With the knowledge of good and evil, we wage wars, we torture people.

With this knowledge we have enslaved whole races of people.

Indeed, we crucified the very Son of God, all while relying on the best and brightest religious authorities (the Pharisees and Sadducees) and the most sophisticated legal system (the Roman Empire's) in the civilized world!

Our managing good and evil leaves an awful lot to be desired.

Something needs to change, and today, the day of Pentecost, marks that change.

Today, something happens between us and Jesus, and today, I think something happens with the age old problem of knowing good from evil.

At Pentecost, God takes up our broken humanity and makes us into something new.

It's there in the thousands of ears that are hearing the truth spoken by the apostles – each in her own language, it's there in the cloud of unity that envelopes this motley crew of once separated people from all parts of the world, so that, in the miracle that is Pentecost, the knowledge of good and evil, which has been our undoing, is somehow taken up into God and then given back to us by God, but in a completely new way.

What is that new way?

You'll see it in the last sentence from John's gospel:

“Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

This is a gift given not just to the twelve, not just to the ordained priests and bishops who follow them; but this is a gift given to everyone who signs on as a follower of Jesus.

Through the Holy Spirit, we are given the power to forgive: and those most in need of forgiveness are those who specialize in telling good from evil, right from wrong.

And who are these specialists you ask?

Turn to your left, turn to your right, then take a look at your own belly button.

We are the specialists!

We are convinced that we know right from wrong, the good from the bad, and way too many of us will go to the grave nursing this or that grudge, this or that fury at this or that nation or enemy or burden; all the time wallowing in this original sin of humanity.

It is from that fate that Jesus, through his Holy Spirit, rescues us this Pentecost morning.

The knowledge of good and evil which we once stole from God is now given back to us by God, but it is given back to us with a twist, or maybe better, it is given back to us with a new tool.

Maybe we can think of that tool as a lens, a lens intended to correct the lousy vision we have when deciding who is right and who is wrong.

That lens has a name.

It is the lens called forgiveness.

The gift of Pentecost might be that each and every time we find ourselves judging what is right and who is wrong, Pentecost gives us the grace to see with the eye of forgiveness; Pentecost gives us the chance to speak gently with the voice of forgiveness; to listen carefully with the ear of forgiveness, all so that when we go into the world to help heal so much brokenness, we bring to this sacred task the hands, the gentle touch, of forgiveness.

I'm sure you have noticed that the very best stories of human redemption are all about peering into the abyss of what is good and what is evil through the corrective lens of forgiveness.

Take Gary Ridgeway for example, a brute who murdered 71 women.

After his conviction, the families of the victims confronted him, and understandably, most everyone said they hoped he'd rot in hell and asked the judge to impose the maximum sentence.

Ridgeway returned their anger with a stoney indifference.

"Then Bob Rule stood up to speak.

He told the man who had ruthlessly murdered his daughter that he didn't hate him.

That he didn't want retribution.

He said: "I forgive you."

At that moment, Gary Ridgeway began to cry.

In the face of such grace, his hatred and anger gave way .. ..." Baker, Executing God, 97.

And then there is a man named Darrol who came home one evening to find his house trashed and burglarized.

For quite some time, there had been a series of burglaries in the neighborhood and a whole lot of people felt violated, victimized and angry.

Like his neighbors, many of Darrol's valuables were stolen, many others destroyed.

When the police caught the teenagers who did the damage, instead of pressing charges, Darrol went and talked with the boys, expressing his sorrow and forgiveness.

The boys apologized and Darrol invited them all to his home for a dinner; a meal the boys themselves shopped for and cooked and presented not only to Darrol but to many of the other neighbors.

This dinner gave birth to an annual block party, with the boys making the food for the very same neighbors they once terrorized.

Darrol says: "We can do something other than buying bigger fences and bigger locks.

Hatred cannot be met with hatred.

It has to be met with love." Id.

Figuring out what is good and what is evil by gazing through the lens of forgiveness, of course, has its start with the very ones who encounter Jesus in that locked room.

Remember where they are and who they are: they are the runaways, locked in tight, terrified at being found by the same authorities that murdered Jesus, terrified of coming to the same end as Jesus, and they are a seething mess of something else too: they are consumed with the guilt that grows like a fungus out of their cowardice.

After all, only hours before they were all loudly thumping their chests, assuring Jesus that he is quite wrong to think they will chicken out on him, promising to walk with him even to death if need be.

And yet here they sit, Peter, who denies Jesus three times in the face of a twelve year old interrogator.

The others are no better.

Not a man among them stands with Jesus.

All ran away.

So when Jesus comes to them today, you'd think maybe he'd have pink slips for the whole lot of them.

Instead, he gives them the power of the Spirit ---- but he gives it to them through the lens of forgiveness.

I've said before and I'll say it again, one of the greatest gifts of the Bible is the irony that runs right through it.

That's why I have to laugh sometimes when folks get too literal with the Scriptures, because they miss the delicious irony and humor and chagrin that is the soul and sinew of these sacred writings.

Who doesn't get a gas out of Jesus saying to the most short-sighted apostle, the fellow with two feet made entirely of clay: "On this rock I will build my church."

Or how, just the other week, the two walking to Emmaus meet up with Jesus and scold him for being so ignorant when it comes to the events in Jerusalem these last few days: not realizing the one they are speaking to is the only one who really does know what's happened, and why.

Just so, today's gospel lesson is also overflowing with irony, and I wonder if you heard it.

To these frightened, deserting, cowardly folks gathered in their fear and guilt, Jesus says, "Receive the Holy Spirit, if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

In other words, he's telling them, "you can forgive and you can refuse to forgive."

Do you hear the irony?

Who among us has the right, who among us has the nerve, to refuse to forgive **any sin**, in light of the forgiveness that we have received from God?

I think when Jesus is telling them they can forgive or retain sins, he's wanting them to remember the parables.

Like the son who comes stumbling home having blown dad's hard won estate, only to be welcomed like a returning hero....

Like the vineyard owner who hires workers all day long, and pays the guys who show up 5 minutes before closing the same \$20 bucks as the guy who worked since dawn.

But most especially, I think Jesus wants them, and us, to remember one parable in particular.

The one about the servant who owed his boss a kazillion dollars, and whom the boss threatened to put away till it was paid.

Of course, you can't repay a kazillion dollars, it's impossible.

So the boss simply forgives the debt.

Boom.

Done.

Get on with your life.

Except as the servant leaves the miracle of his boss' forgiveness, he bumps into Harry who owes him a hundred bucks — and demands his hundred then and there — and ignores Harry's promise to pay and his pleas for mercy — and has Harry tossed into the clink.

He retains the debt, and we all remember what became of that fellow.

When we wade into the mess that is our world, with its competing claims of who's right and who's wrong, as we muddle our way through complicated family lives where folks, as often as not, are upset with one another over slights and arguments, perceived and real, as we venture forth into our increasingly fractured world that seems so loaded with dogma and certainty, so lacking in humility and openness to mystery, perhaps we can ask for that power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus so recklessly pours out on good and bad alike today, and ask for the grace, when all is said and done, to see one another; friend and foe; acquaintance and lover; mother and child, through the lens of forgiveness; and in seeing one another in that way, to pray God that we too might be seen in just the same way.

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