

I Am Not Worthy

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“I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” John 1:27

Some thirty plus years ago, in what seems another lifetime, when I was first ordained, the liturgical language of the Episcopal Church was quite different from what it is today. The language of unworthiness and sinfulness was liberally sprinkled throughout the liturgy of the Holy Communion. Just before receiving communion we would say, “We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table.”

In the diocese of Virginia, where I was ordained, we weren't doing all that much gathering up the crumbs under the table, because it was a “low-church” diocese. Morning Prayer, not the Eucharist, was the usual Sunday service. The rhetorical emphasis from the start of the morning service was on sin: we had “erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,” we had “followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,” we had “offended against thy holy laws.” We were “miserable offenders” and there was “no health in us.” All this before 9:35 in the morning! A few lines later, however, we were promising that we would do better and “hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life” to the glory of God's holy name.

The cadence of this language was magisterial, and many loved it and fought bitterly over any changes to it, but if you *actually listened* to its content the chief theme was a whole lot of begging for mercy, a kind of “please don't hit me” prayer to God the

Enforcer. This theology did give voice to a feeling that many people know, a down deep sense of inadequacy, of not being good enough, but I'm not sure it did much to relieve us of the burden of being flawed. Each week we kept promising to do better next time, but I think *this language served more to reinforce than relieve the feeling of inadequacy.*

Last week in the Buddhist Christian Dialogue class that John Thatamanil and I teach downstairs in the Divinity School. we had a visiting theologian from Emory, Wendy Farley. Wendy grew up in the Presbyterian Church, but has fled dour Calvinism for an Episcopal refuge. Even so, she has some reservations about what's going on in church as it affects her children. She has one daughter, a more resilient type, who is an acolyte and weekly exposed to the liturgical language of sin without apparent damage. But Wendy has another daughter, a more sensitive type, whom Wendy wants having no exposure to the language of sinfulness and unworthiness. This daughter is already prone to a sense of not-enough-ness, having endured too many years at the hands of an abusive father, without drinking of the chalice of unworthiness on Sunday.

Some of our students, especially from more evangelical traditions, were pretty flabbergasted by the statement that this deeply faithful theologian didn't want her daughter going to church, and John in our next class did a wonderful job of putting this business about sinfulness and unworthiness in a historical, theological context for us.

In the Early Church, John reminded us, the language of sin was set in the key of captivity and slavery, so *salvation was seen as freedom from bondage and captivity and the defeat of the powers of death.* You hear Scriptural echoes in the passage from Isaiah this morning: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to proclaim ... deliverance to the captives." The spiritual journey, in this view, is about finding freedom

from what enslaves us, as in the Biblical story of the Exodus. Our problem is not so much that we have “done wrong or been bad,” but that we are in prison, both of inner habit and external social structure, enslaved by what is death-dealing and not life-giving. Think addiction. Think Proposition Eight. Think consumerism, the real religion of America.

In the Middle Ages, John noted, theology about the person and work of Jesus was set in the key of the theologian Anselm, who saw sin not in terms of captivity, but in terms of guilt and debt. Jesus, Anselm said, paid with his blood the debt we ourselves owed to a God demanding recompense. You hear echoes of this thinking in the Rite I Eucharist (which again we never do here at St. Augustine’s, but it’s in our Prayer Book). We say that Jesus made on the cross “by his one oblation of himself once offered, a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.” This language draws on the Biblical temple story of animal sacrifice. The medieval language of *atonement as blood sacrifice to buy satisfaction and forgiveness* is an understanding that is in large measure locked into Christian liturgy. Because we hear it week after week, and you’ll hear this language of sacrifice today, this theology has dominated popular Christianity, even though there are other theological options.

One option, as John noted, is to see sin more in terms of meaninglessness and estrangement. Sin is, to use Paul Tillich’s language, separation. The spiritual journey here is first about *waking up* to realize that we find ourselves separated: from one another, from our sense of our own goodness, from what gives life and New Being, from God as we understand God. To use another Biblical master story, *salvation is about homecoming*; it is the return from Exile and separation. As Thomas Merton put it,

salvation is the return to my true self, to myself as God's beloved, from the false self, the self that with futility attempts to secure itself through strategies of ambition or achievement or affluence or appearance. Redemption is return to the community of those coming home.

The theologian Marcus Borg has asked, and I think rightly, whether sin is the best term for the human condition. He favors letting go of sin as the umbrella description of the human condition, on biblical grounds. He says, "The Bible has many pairs of metaphors for our sense that something is wrong and what we need. In bondage, we need liberation. In exile, we need return and reconnection. Blind, we need our sight restored. Sick and wounded, we need healing. Hungry and thirsty, we need food and drink. Sinful and unclean, we need forgiveness and cleansing. Dead and entombed, we need to be raised to new life." We have closed hearts, hard hearts (*sclerokardia* in Greek) and need new, open, softened hearts. (Borg 2004, 151-4)

Sinfulness and the feeling of unworthiness then are but one dimension of our problem as human beings. The Messiah, the anointed one, in Isaiah's vision brings salvation in so many ways. Forgiveness and Inclusion are Jesus' two great themes, as Richard Rohr says. For many of us however, our central existential issue is not, as Borg says, a sense of sin. But the language of captivity, of blindness, of exile, or of the closed heart may resonate quite intimately with our experience of what is amiss, and what speaks to the deep needs of the human heart. The revision of the liturgy of the Prayer Book in the 1970's was a step in the right direction, at least in its provision of alternatives to the Anselmian theology and unworthiness, but there is room for more good work here. That's the topic of another sermon.

I want to return to not being worthy to “gather up the crumbs” under the Lord’s table. Interestingly, I believe this prayer was for many people *the* moment in the liturgy of *greatest emotional resonance*, not because of the expression of unworthiness, but on account of what followed. “Thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us, therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.”

It is this *mutual indwelling*, God in us and we in God, what Frederick Buechner calls “the me in Thee,” that truly nourishes us and is why I come to this table. In places of mutual indwelling, often known aesthetically through music, through nature, through goodness and truth and beauty, we know what Celtic Christians call “thin places,” where the visible world of ordinary reality is intersected by the sacred. When we awaken to this Presence, chills may come to the body, tears to the eyes, the breath stops, eyes open to the obvious that God is everywhere, in everything, and it is the sacred in which we are living, and moving, and having our being, moment by moment. Mutual indwelling, “that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.”

Finally, what about John the Baptist and his sense of not being worthy to untie the thong of Jesus’ sandal, which, by the way, would have been the task of a slave? When I asked Wendy Farley why she had been attracted to Tibetan Buddhism and saw it as a resource for better understanding our own Christian faith, she said it was her experience of being in the presence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This simple Tibetan monk was a window for her into the “More” we call divine. People, and not only Christian people, can be “thin places,” shining with the sacred. One student came up to me after class and said he’d had a similar experience of being in the presence of Pope John Paul II. I had an

experience in being on retreat with the Buddhist Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. For the first time I got it, in the flesh, of what it might have been like to be in Jesus' presence, a being so concentrated with loving-kindness and compassion that I saw what is possible for a human being who gives him or herself to the mutual indwelling, the "me in Thee."

My Buddhist teacher Guy Armstrong tells the story of going to Katmandu and getting to meet Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, a very high Tibetan lama of great spiritual realization. Beforehand Guy said he was anxious at meeting this very great teacher, but Guy said when he looked into Nyoshul Khen's eyes, he felt he was looking through and into the essence of all things, into nirvana itself. It was *so still* looking into this teacher's eyes, Guy said, that in this gaze he felt like Nyoshul Khen was looking right through him. Guy got anxious again, came out of this "nirvana space," made his bows, and left. But the meeting gave him a transmission experience of the mind of a great spiritual teacher.

When John the Baptist says that he's not worthy (the Greek is *ou axios*, which can be translated as "not fitted") to untie the thong of Jesus' sandals, I think he's saying, "I am not fitted even to do this. Your realization of the divine is of a wholly different order than mine." I read John's statement not so much as one of self-judgment. Like Guy Armstrong's experience, it's a statement of *utter awe* at what is present in Jesus. For Jesus, *all are worthy* to stand in his presence. No one, no matter what, is outside his love, because *that love dwells in us*, whether we actually *feel* the connection to it, or not.

When we come into a "thin place," *we wake up* from the dream of unworthiness.

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