

**Sermon, 17 June 2007—Proper 6**

2 Samuel 11:26—12:15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2:11-21; Luke 7:36-50

The three lessons we heard today are unusually powerful. Each is about public humiliation and forgiveness; that means each one is about honesty; and that means each one is about trust in God. David, the Jewish king, the man after God's own heart, the model monarch, is shown publicly to be an adulterer and murderer. The nameless woman, guilty of unnamed sins, incapable of further humiliation, therefore full of courage and resolve, dissolves publicly in remorse and gratitude. Our dear older brother Paul, whose life by the law brought about his death to the law in a scandalous public collapse, holds himself up publicly as one crucified, shamed and condemned, dead to the world, alive only by the faith and grace of Christ.

In our day, these kinds of things are entertainment and shrewd publicity. This is always the way in an era of decadent soulless religion. Those in the grip of that culture become impatient with truth and eager for feeling. Convictions are set aside in favor of sensations. Personal vulnerability is traded off in favor of public spectacle. Take a moment to visualize David wringing his hands, while Oprah leans forward, frowning and nodding, or the disheveled woman wiping her mascara off her cheeks and chin as Dr. Phil shakes his head, murmuring encouragement, or Paul being interviewed, hysterical after being voted off yet another reality show to which he ever gave everything he had. This is all the evidence you need that our culture was once a Christian culture, which understood repentance and restoration, and that we have turned moral standards into theatrics, and the omnipresence of God, in whose sight no one living can be justified, into twenty-four hour cable access, where you can dial in to cast your vote. Yes,

the shape of Christianity is still there; but our skull is eyeless and our ribcage breathless. If your ratings need a boost, you can always fall into sin and repent and return to your public, so long as you do so at primetime.

So we have a hard time with these three figures. We expect such stories. We are tired of them. We turn to them when we have a hankering for some outrage, so we can displace some anger, or a little yen for a shower of tears, so we can displace some grief. But, friends, let me say again that today's lessons about how we might respond when other people know what is true about us—our public shame, disgrace, and weakness—and that means that these lessons are about honesty, and that means they are about trust in God. It matters that we understand them, because whether or not you can come to trust God is the only thing that matters, because on your death bed, only trust in God will enable you to loosen the grip of your terrified fist; so it is wisdom to start practicing trust now.

David's story shows us that trust is about prompt acknowledgement. Unlike other public officials in living memory, he does not cavil, evade, dissimulate, prevaricate, and lie. Cover your children's ears so I can remind you of this scandalous story. He found a war and sent his soldiers off to fight while he remained in his palace, and during that time he dallied with a female member of his court. Now this did not take place on Pennsylvania Avenue, in spite of what you recall, because the woman is a general's wife, who becomes pregnant with David's child, so he arranges to have the general killed off in a battle of this war he won't join, and takes the woman as one of his wives.

When Nathan cleverly exposes him, David promptly acknowledges what he has done wrong. That is the first thing to learn from these lessons. Don't hesitate to embrace the truth. All of us are messy creatures. All of us

try to slip things past. Many arguments over breakfast are about being found out as we were trying to get our own way. It is easy to understand that all of us fail and fall short. Strangely, we want to forgive each other, if we can. But it is not easy to be patient with someone who tries to deny having any flaws, who refuses to admit making any mistakes, who will not confess to sacrificing others to selfish goals.

Prompt acknowledgment is an admission that, in spite of our dishonesty, our first loyalty is truth. Our deeper desire to return to a life that recognizes truth enables us to admit promptly when we have gone wrong. We simply don't want the alienation and separation and isolation that are necessary once we begin to lie. Cunning is more exhausting than candor; cleverness is more self-destructive than kindness. Hidden in the prompt acknowledgement is a longing for reconciliation and for truth.

The unnamed woman teaches us shameless gratitude. Most of us, I believe, like to take our forgiveness home, tuck it under our pillow, and only take it out in the dead of night, where we might stare at it, puzzled and disbelieving and relieved. To show we have been forgiven, after all, is to show that we were in need. That is a disastrous way to debase your personal stock. "Never apologize, never explain" is our culture's rule for those who like to present themselves as winners; in defeat, that rule transmogrifies into "never be grateful, never accept pardon," because to do either is to confess to having fallen. What is the summary of the Law, then? "Never let 'em see you sweat." And we can be grateful that we have CNN and C-Span so we can see for ourselves who are the true believers and receive their testimony.

How this astonishing woman throws all that aside: shameless gratitude cresting way past the flood stage! Jesus understands that this is not about him, but about her defiantly entering into the public record her claim

to having been forgiven. She is showing every pursed-lipped, narrow-eyed, tight-sphinctered Pharisee in that room that they have nothing on her any more. Only this eruption of gratitude shows how free she is. She doesn't care that she is showing how badly she wanted this reconciliation. She is showing how triumphantly secure she feels that this forgiveness in which she is glowing and pulsing and bursting is fully totally irrevocably hers. And the proof is this overflow of gratitude, this eagerness to show that she feels rich enough to lavish perfume, safe enough to shed tears, powerful enough to enter a house where she is not welcome. None of us get there unless we grasp that God has brought us to His wounded side with love.

What we learn from our dear older brother Paul is total abandonment of our former life. That completes the journey. It is not enough, though it is essential, to acknowledge promptly; we do that when we want to get someone off our back—and they will go away soon enough. It is not enough to show shameless gratitude; we do that when we let our emotions run away with us—and they will run in another direction soon enough. No, Paul, teaches us everything. To see and acknowledge that we have been living viciously, whether we nurse malice in secret or whether we lash out over supper or textbooks or contracts or machinery—that is the first step. Paul had persecuted the Church of God to the death. To pour out our gratitude, whether we embrace others in secret or whether we tell our story and promote reconciliation wherever we are—that is the second step. Paul sought out the very people he had persecuted. The third step is what Jesus saw in the woman and what Paul also lived out: a new creation.

If all this is about trust in God, nothing could force that issue more than our readiness to stop being what we were and to become something new. Only God has the power to effect a new creation. That is exactly what

Paul proclaims in a series of breathtaking statements. “I have been crucified with Christ,” he says first. The brutal life he promptly acknowledged cannot be continued. Paul came to see his former life, with all its grotesque and lethal self-righteousness, as a corrupt corpse on a cross. The end of that way of life was death, not only death for others, but for him. To proclaim himself as crucified was to show a human being broken on the rigidity of religious fanaticism—as you will be broken when you stiffen yourself with your self-will, determined to control outcomes. At the end of that road, life is nailed to a stick and hung up to rot. Paul saw that what had happened to Jesus in his innocence had also happened to Paul in his guilt; what they shared was their abjection. His acknowledgment of that, when it came, was prompt and devastating and blinded him to everything else until the One he persecuted healed him. He could not go back to the life he had once lived.

Paul also says, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” The whole point of displaying himself as crucified with Christ is to show from what depths God can raise us to new life. Resurrection is the point; to be grateful for resurrection, one must have been demonstrably powerlessly dead, and yet brought back to life. This is the furthest expression of the shameless gratitude demonstrated by the woman: Paul become totally identified with the One who restored his life. He will not simply follow him, but will *live as* him. What fuller way to keep joy and love going than this? No wonder he can be shameless, because he, with his old life, the source of his shame, is no longer—and there is no shame in Christ, who now is alive in him. What greater and more enduring gratitude can there be than for Paul, or for that woman, or for me, or for you, dear sisters and brothers, to be freed in this way from shame forever? You are free because, when Christ lives in you, you are not what you used to be at

all, and what now lives in you is not the scampering plotting frightened humanoid life-form you were, not even a “new you,” which would still need to be kept polished and serviced, but God’s Only-begotten, God’s beloved child is now the life in you. How could it even be possible to go back to the life you once lived?

As I said to the handful of us who had the blessing during our Easter season Bible study of sitting with Paul and trying to hear him in this letter to the Galatian Christians, it seems to me that only the most extraordinary personal restoration through an internal vision can explain this. All the evidence points to a total breakdown, maybe even a psychotic break, in Paul, which was repaired through an experience of the Risen Christ in him, the One who had himself been destroyed and yet lives. Paul, desperate in his collapse, saw that what had happened to Jesus could happen to him if he had the faith of Christ.

The Greek in this letter is so much more richly ambiguous than we let it be in translation. What Paul wrote is this: “the life I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith *of* Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Did you hear that? Not “faith *in* Jesus Christ,” but the “faith *of* Jesus Christ.” It seems to me that Paul, always excitable, always extreme, whose only approach to human relations was “slash-and-burn,” whose only form of introspection was “scorched earth,” had fried himself to ashes, and from those cinders and blisters saw that the one who had endured death and lived was Christ. About this, the witnesses of Scripture all agree: even though Jesus was not recognizable to his disciples at first, with the recognition that it was indeed HE who was with them again came conviction and a release of such a tidal wave of courage and peace and trust that it swept their former life away. When Paul came to experience somehow the presence of the

Risen Christ, and therefore to undergo the effect of Jesus' trust that enables love and life to rise from the grave, he hurled himself into it. Paul says he lives because of the faith that can accomplish Resurrection, and he confesses that it is not his faith, but the faith of Jesus, "who went about doing good and healing all those who were oppressed of the devil, because God was with him," and who, "having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end," sure to "lose nothing that the Father had given" him, because "nothing could snatch them out of his hand." That faith of Jesus Christ, Paul understood, is what could give him new life, since it was the faith of the One who was himself raised from the dead, never to return to his old life. Paul knew that if the Risen One lived in him, for whom the limits of this world were no more, then these limits were no more for him either, and his old life also was over, because those who have been raised from the dead do not live as what they once were.

We may not want this. But if prompt acknowledgment of our sin is because of our love of truth, and if shameless gratitude for our forgiveness is because of our security in that truth, then a refusal to return to our old life can only be because we now want to live from that truth, and that is possible only if we trust God as Jesus trusted God—or even, as Paul would say, if we let Jesus trust God for us and let him live in us. Dear sisters and brothers, believe me: if Jesus lives in us, we will never again be what we were. Instead we will move from glory to glory in the unending praise of the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, the One God, whom we praise today and hope to praise for all eternity.