

Finding That Which Was Lost – Brian Hartley

Exodus 32:7-14; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-10

I have discovered, to my consternation, that as I age I have a propensity to forget things—that I have, in short, acquired a significant loss of memory. I used to know exactly where everything was kept. A student would come into my office and inquire about some arcane reference I had made in class and I could point to the book on one of a half-dozen bookcases from which it came and, oftentimes, to the exact page. But these days I find myself knowing that there is a word in my brain that will fit a particular sentence—it is there on the tip of my tongue—but, for the life of me, I can't quite remember it. While I am heartened by the author, Ian Brown, in his recent book, Sixty: A Diary of My Sixty-First Year, that what I am experiencing is entirely normal, it nonetheless frustrates me to no end.

Learning to deal with loss can be quite difficult—whether it is a matter of one's memory, a misplaced keepsake, or the loss of a loved one. In fact, some of the world's greatest literature focuses on the subject of dealing with human loss. Early on, we have stories of Achilles and Patroclus at Troy or Odysseus and his attempted multi-year return to Penelope. My favorite set of stories as a child captured this sense of loss, when Lancelot's affair with Guinevere led to his breaking of the first rule of the Order of the Round Table: "Nothing before honor." The shattering of the table and of its fellowship left behind a sense of something forever lost. From Eden, to Atlantis, to Camelot—there remains within each of us a sense of "something gone wrong," of God's good creation somehow askew from its intended purpose.

In the Old Testament, this plays itself out in the prologue of Genesis, which concludes with the story of the Tower of Babel as the consummate tale of the loss of unity as the tower is abandoned and confusion reigns. Fragmentation and dispersal follow. But in the calling of Moses and the rescue of the people of Israel from Egypt in the book of Exodus, hope springs anew that that which was lost will be restored in God's holy covenant with his people. Today's text, however, demonstrates on just how slender a thread hangs such a hope.

In the historic liturgy of the church, the rite of matrimony drips with the language of covenant. At the end of the marriage vows uttered by both bride and groom, there is the line, "and thereto I pledge you my troth." This is the seal of the covenant of marriage. We don't ask them whether they feel anything; the church asks whether they will pledge a lifetime of faithfulness to one another. It is this call to covenant faithfulness that dogs God's people and becomes the burr in the saddle of a holy relationship. God remains faithful, while his people engage in continual acts of unfaithfulness.

In today's narrative, Yahweh tries to turn the tide by telling Moses, *Go down at once! Your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely* (Exodus 32:7). Robert Alter even suggests that this is something of a test for Moses, to discover whether he sees himself as the progenitor of a new nation. Moses, however, counters the Lord God by referring to them not as his people, but as God's. In fact, in his engaging dialogue with the deity he uses two arguments that result in God's changing his mind. First, he invokes the preservation of God's reputation. After all, in a world of multiple gods, Yahweh's place in the pantheon is what

is really at stake, he suggests. And then, to clinch the argument, he reminds God that he had made a promise to these he has branded a *stiff-necked* people. To go back on that promise now would endanger whether God's word could be trusted. So, whether God likes it or not, he is stuck with this group of faithless folk.

What binds this story together with the lessons that will follow is its emphasis on God's mercy. While we may see God's response in the narrative as less than charitable, we must remember that God's anger is centered in the sinfulness and covenant-breaking behavior that has broken out in religious orgy at the foot of the mountain. And he wants Moses to recognize the depth of their evil, as well. Though we don't have a copy of the liturgy which framed their worship at Sinai, it is clear that it was rooted in the language of idolatry and empire. The irony is not lost on those of us who have been following the story. After all, why are they retreating to the worship of the Egyptian empire when Yahweh had, just a few chapters before, proven himself at the Sea of Reeds, drowning the very symbol of Egyptian imperial superiority—their chariots?

But, perhaps we may wonder, they don't recognize that they cannot serve two gods at once (something the Ten Commandments, not yet brought down the mountain, will challenge). After all, we genuflect before the god of empire and culture as well. If you don't believe it, just observe the actions of a certain NFL football player who has dared to challenge our national liturgy rooted in that most American of sports. Whether one agrees or not with his actions, they have pulled the curtain back on liturgical actions and activities that faithful Americans engage in on a regular basis—placing hands over one's heart, pledging allegiance, doffing caps, and singing with nationalistic fervor. One may certainly justify such actions based on Martin Luther's theory of "two kingdoms," but not recognizing them as liturgical actions immersed in the propagation of symbols of empire—that may stand in tension with, or perhaps even in opposition to, Christ's kingdom—is, at best, somewhat naïve.

At other times, our culture oftentimes encourages a kind of "cheap grace," as Bonhoeffer describes it. "Come on," we are challenged, "just look the other way this one time." But mercy is not some kind of "free pass" or a changing of the definition of sinful behavior. On the contrary, claims the moral philosopher, Eleonore Stump, "If you don't see the evil in what others are doing, you aren't merciful. You are just a moral idiot." So it is that Moses' very skillful rhetorical response to God is not predicated on portraying the Israelites as "not so bad," but entreating God, based on God's character, God's reputation, and God's promises to show mercy.

And perhaps no one was less deserving of mercy than the zealous and hyper-religious Saul, who became the apostle Paul. In today's text, he describes himself using three extraordinarily harsh terms—*blasphemer*, *persecutor*, and *man of violence*. At the heart of this final term is the root word, "hubris," from which violence emanates. The final recourse for either the solipsist or the narcissist is always complete and utter destruction of the "other." Hate and harm bubble up from those turned in upon themselves. Clearly, Paul refuses to gloss over his own evil; he, also, is no moral idiot.

But while Paul describes himself using such highly-charged language, he proclaims himself the recipient of God's mercy anyway. As Professor Stump says, "God could see the man Paul could become. For the sake of the man Paul could be in the future, God had mercy on him." Risto

Saarinen goes even further, explaining that “God’s mercy appears to be a preparatory stage in the process of salvation. It is a divine attitude in which God does not proceed to punitive justice but allows room for other considerations” (The Pastoral Epistles, 43).

Paul knows and understands that he, like the people of Israel in the first story, should be the rightful recipient of God’s judgement. His conduct was reprehensible. In fact, according to the book of Acts, he actively participated in the slaughtering of Christians. God’s mercy, for him, is not a “looking past,” but a “looking through” to a new and different person. But in order for him to receive God’s mercy, he, too, first had to suffer loss. That loss occurred on the infamous “Road to Damascus,” where he was struck blind. Held hostage in a realm of darkness, he was forced to recognize his dependence upon God and upon others. Saul’s loss became Paul’s gain. The loss of sight allowed room to both see himself for what he was, and for God to be seen and experienced by him. The outcome was a recognition of his own sinfulness and the ability to recognize mercy for what it truly was—a sheer gift from God.

That same sense of mercy discovered through loss pervades the entire fifteenth chapter of Luke’s Gospel. Of course, the most famous of the three stories (not included in today’s lection) is that of the Prodigal Son, who was lost and then found—the sinful reprobate who became the recipient of his father’s all-encompassing mercy. His “loss” of material wealth landed him in the pig pen where he, like Paul, had something of an epiphany that resulted in his restoration to favor. And, lest we be too hard on his older brother, let me remind you that he is no “moral idiot” either, but takes the side of the same angry God we saw in this morning’s first lesson, insisting on righteous and holy judgment. And, most certainly, those listening in on this parable are clearly waiting for Jesus to pronounce words of judgment on the father, not words of mercy on the son.

The key to the entire chapter, though, I would like to suggest, is in the framework established by the evangelist. For in the opening verses of the gospel lesson, the narrator is carefully contrasting two groups of people. On the one hand, we are told, are *all the tax collectors and sinners*, while on the other are *the Pharisees and the scribes*. Of the former, he tells us, they *were coming near to listen to him*, while of the latter group he almost mutters under his breath, they *were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”* The juxtaposition here could not be more stark nor, to a first-century Jewish audience, more startling. In their world, to be labeled tax collector or sinner was to find one’s self near the bottom of the social pyramid, while to be called Pharisee or scribe meant to be given an honorific which would be applied to those considered to be of the highest social ranking.

So when Jesus says in verse ten, at the end of our gospel reading, *Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*, he is inverting the priorities of the status quo and the way they would have conceived of rank order in society. Jesus’ words were clearly meant for the ears of both groups of people and would have created an overwhelming sense of relief and joy for the one, while provoking anger and hostility for the other.

It is hard to believe that today marks the fifteenth anniversary of 9/11. For some of us, it seems like only yesterday. I can clearly remember standing in a circle with a group of students in shock from the very visceral images flooding onto our campus from Manhattan—in those days,

primarily via television, not computer. And I can remember speaking with my friends at an Episcopal parish at Ground Zero as they recounted their stories of the walking wounded. But for others here today, who were but toddlers or young children, while it provided the framework in which you grew up, it is primarily a story confined to the past.

What I do think, however, binds us all together is the way that act of violence unleashed weapons both verbal and concrete which have torn a searing gap in the fabric of our society, which continues unabated to this day. There is an ugliness, a vituperation, which has spilled over into our discussions about politics, religion, and sexuality. Politicians play off of our biases and fears, just as companies profit from it. And neither side, neither left nor right, seems capable of hearing the other or participating in any kind of conversation without belittling the other.

We, like they, have a tendency, when we hear texts such as today's, to read ourselves into the role of the "good guy." We all know that had we been at Sinai, we would never have participated in the worship of the golden calf. We are too wise, too sophisticated for that. But, if I am really honest with myself, I know that I am more like the older brother than I am like the prodigal son. And, while I might desire mercy for myself, I require judgment for others. After all, that is only fair!

The truth that Paul discovered, though, is that sometimes it takes us being struck blind before we begin to understand, even partially, where we've gone wrong. We have grown so accustomed to our places of power and privilege that we no longer even recognize them as such. We participate in time-honored rituals without question, never recognizing the ultimate allegiance to which we are being beckoned. And, with so many material goods around us, with so many weapons to protect us from others, we are in danger of becoming moral idiots—people who can neither see the evil in themselves or in others.

That is something of the predicament, it is suggested, which stands behind the context of this morning's psalm. It took the prophet, Nathan, coming face-to-face with King David, in order for him to see where he stood. And it eventually took the loss of Bathsheba's child, and later his son, Absalom, before "the man after God's own heart" recognized his own deep propensity towards sin and need of mercy. For it was only through his deep and painful loss that the mercy of God began to take on meaning.

I don't know what your place of pain and loss is this morning. Only God knows. But I do know that that wound offers an opportunity for you to be made whole. It is only in learning to name and embrace our loss that God's mercy can be discovered. That is the story behind today's scripture lessons which finds concrete expression as we come to the Lord's Table this morning. The table becomes the place where our loss can be offered up and covered through Christ's suffering and death on the cross. As C. S. Lewis reminds us so poignantly in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, beneath the Table stands a deep magic rooted in Christ's death and resurrection. Here the covenant begun with Moses and God's people continues to be re-enacted in this congregation. I invite you to see this Table for what it is: a place for those who know and have experienced loss, but who seek God's mercy. May the bread and wine become for you, for us, the Body of Christ, and may you find, in the one who was willing to lose everything, healing and hope for the future.

