

6/16-17/2007

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15

Galatians 2:11-21

Luke 7:36-50

When I began the process toward ordination, I was told that I would have to undergo some psychological exams. I was not told that they would be three days long. In fact, I had to journey to Dallas, 180 miles away, to a clinic which existed solely to test, I mean to work with, people who want to be ministers. The clinic, oddly enough, was located literally across the street from a roller coaster at Six Flags over Texas. You could even hear the thrill seekers yelling at the top of their lungs. As I entered the office, I thought, "I know what you mean." My stomach was in my throat. When I walked into the office, I was told that the first day would consist mostly of written profiles. I was ushered into a room with piles of number two pencils and papers. The first was tedious but relatively easy. It had questions that kept repeating themselves, hoping that I would be lured into their trickery. Other exams, though, were more difficult, an example question being, "True or False: My boss has control of my life." As my bishop would review a lengthy report at the end of the three days, I found myself in a difficult situation. There was finally, though, a psychological profile that seemed more like a Cosmo quiz. It kept asking questions like, "I like to keep things neat and tidy or I don't mind if everything is a mess." I was hoping it was going to tell me what to search for in a mate, but I was soon told that it was attempting to gauge something very particular: whether or not I am or was a perfectionist. Now, I must say, perhaps you have not figured this out about me, but I am one, a perfectionist. And soon, I found myself doing something that I have never confessed, right there in that place which was supposed to vet ministers of the Lord. Realizing that perfectionism might be considered a bad trait. And wanting to be perfect, I learned that I could appear to be ok being imperfect when the idea of perfection is actually imperfection, if you can follow that. Luckily, everything went perfectly. They saw me as imperfect which was perfection, and I was passed through.

The truth is, news flash, I am not perfect, none of us are, even if we try and hide that fact. Even Mary Poppins was only practically perfect in every way, meaning, there could have been room for improvement. As such, today, I would like to talk about what it means to be human in the sense of not being perfect. More specifically, and more to the point I want to talk about a possible theology of failure, which could be seen as a theme in our readings today. Unlike much of Christianity, unlike much of the world and many of our jobs, I really believe that God cares more about how we deal with failure, both our own and others', than whether we are perfect, practically perfect, or absolutely no good.

Writer Tom Ehrich has said, "In a perfect world, we admit our mistakes, learn from them, and move on. As it is, we [instead] allow mistakes to paralyze us. From crown to commoner, as it were, the scenario tends to be hide, deny, fume and forget. From peccadilloes to failed policies, from deliberate plunder to lapses in judgment, from crimes of passion to crimes of desperation to crimes of cruelty, we tend to hear chorales of denial and secrecy and only the occasional whisper, "Yes, and I'm sorry." In fact, "The only times we tend to really remember or know about wrongs are when they are done to us. Such a posture makes being able to move past failings in ourselves and others impossible." As an aside, I have to say that this is the part in the sermon when I wish

that I could apply these statements toward our current presidential administration and its own denying and fuming, not to mention all of the people who have wronged me, when I should probably be looking at my own self.

In today's Gospel we, likewise, see someone who has failed, someone who is easy to blame. She is a notorious sinner, and she comes to Jesus. In a posture of humility she begs his forgiveness by weeping, bathing his feet with her tears and anointing him with ointment. The righteous Pharisees reject the woman as a sinner and won't grant her any value as a person, a human being. They have a reason to. They could easily have our Old Testament lesson from the morning in their minds, wherein David is punished by God because of his sins. As such, the Pharisees seem to think that if Jesus really knew this woman, he wouldn't have allowed her to even touch him for fear of sin contamination. But Jesus does know the truth about the woman. He has no illusions about her and her faults. And yet he is not deterred. Jesus understands that this woman's truth, her value as a human being is not rooted in her sinfulness, but her faith. And her faith is not measured by obedience to religious codes such as the Pharisees prescribe. Instead, her faith is measured by her depth of gratitude and reconciliation that she shares with the Son of God.

At another point in my process toward ordination, I hit a roadblock, not because of the psychological exams. I had difficulties because I was the first openly gay person to go through the process of ordination in the Diocese of Oklahoma. At one point in my seminary career, I was asked to be celibate, to come back to Oklahoma as a celibate priest. In something that I am ashamed of, I began to acquiesce to their strict strictures. But then, in a moment of grace, I said, "You know... I have taken on many, many spiritual disciplines in my life. I like the idea of having something, some act, or giving up some act that connects me to God. And though I am not called to celibacy, nor will I be celibate for my life, I am willing to consider a year or so... But only on this one condition... That you understand that part of spiritual disciplines is that you fail at them; that they do not always work, that failing, or doing the opposite of a spiritual discipline is often an integral feature of attempting to follow God, because only when you fail and come back to God are you really learning anything." I finally said, "If you are asking me to be celibate simply to make yourselves feel safer or feel like you are avoiding sex, or the topic of sexual orientation, then you have chosen the wrong path and the wrong person."

If we are honest with ourselves, failure is a part of who we are. And this not something to be ashamed by, though we often are. It is not something to criticize in us, though we often do. Instead, failure is simply an opportunity to renew our commitment to live and love God. That woman in front of Jesus understood that far better than the Pharisees. She was not ashamed. She simply knew how to turn back toward the love of God, in a way that even the most religious amongst the world did not.

If we do not live with such an understanding of life, then there is no hope for us or for others. If we do not learn how to forgive others and even our own selves when we fail, resentments and hatreds will grow and eventually tear us from the love of God. Forgiveness of failures is an essential part of Christianity, and that is the rub to a theology of failure. We accept that we fail, and we model what Christ taught us, forgiveness of our sins, the ones we do, and the ones done

to us.

At the back of the prayer book, on page 836 is one of my favorite prayers. It is called the General Thanksgiving. And the reason why I love it is the line, "We thank you for those disappointments and failures that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on you alone," (BCP, 836). Failures lead us to dependence on God, if we let them.

That is the freedom and beauty of Christianity. God doesn't require perfection or adherence to codes, God requires us instead merely to accept that love and forgiveness and spread them into the world and to ultimately transform our world by letting go of every grudge, every resentment, and every urge for retaliation.