

## Proper 6C, 2010, St. Peter's

In one of Eugene O'Neill's plays, *The Great God Brown*, there is a scene toward the end in which a man is on his deathbed. He's very frightened. At his side is a woman who has become something of a mother-figure for him. She speaks to him as if he were a child, "Go to sleep, Billy. It's all right." He replies, "Yes, mother." Then Billy starts to explain what he has experienced, why he's the person he is.

"It was dark, and I couldn't see where I was going, and they all picked on me." The woman then says, "I know. But you're tired now. Go to sleep." And he answers, "And when I wake up?" She replies, "The sun will be rising again." Then Billy interrupts her with great seriousness: "To judge the living and the dead." And adds in great fear, "***I don't want justice. I want love.***"

Dr. Eugene Winkler, notes that "*so many of us are like Billy, we don't want justice. We want love. Because if God is just, only just, then nobody has a chance. It's only God's mercy that promises us new life.*"

We start off this morning's readings with a story of greed, cruelty and evil as Jezebel and King Ahab have their neighbor Naboth stoned to death on trumped up false charges, just so they can have his land.

- At first glance, Ahab's offer to purchase the vineyard of Naboth, which is adjacent to the king's property, is simple matter that could be resolved by negotiations. King Ahab makes a generous offer for it, either a better vineyard or the value in money.
- But Naboth refuses; it's his property, "the inheritance of my ancestors." Ahab, the secular developer doesn't understand Naboth's reasoning. *Naboth regards the family property as a gift from God.*
- In today's day and age most people would understand Ahab's point of view much more easily than Naboth's. "Why not take the offer?" we say. "It's generous. He can have an entirely new start. What's the problem?"
- For Naboth, it's more than land, it is a family heritage. Naboth's refusal to sell that sets the story into motion. The rich and powerful King Ahab's response to Naboth's refusal is childish, weak, and immature. He returns home and pouts. He puts his face to the wall and won't speak to anybody because he didn't get his way. This is the opening Jezebel uses to intervene, she considers Ahab's passivity to be ridiculous. She takes charge, she knows how to get things done. "You're the king. Make it happen."

- I wonder why they have never made a mini-series for TV out of this story, A grown man, powerful and rich, who is little more than a spoiled child, an evil wife who uses her power to get what she wants, scheming to have the community do her dirty work in getting rid of an isolated individual, Naboth, who has the courage to stand against the system. And of course we have the great prophet Elijah, who comes on the scene after all is done to proclaim the “truth” in the whole situation.

After Naboth is dead and King Ahab possesses the property, he is confronted by Elijah, who rightly points out to the king that “***You have sold yourself to do what is evil.***”

- This is the line that brings so many of us into the story, isn’t it? ***You have sold yourself*** strikes at our own twenty-first century hearts.
- It is something we know about, something we have done many times
  1. For popularity when we were in high school or college
  2. for the love at whatever price of virtue or integrity when we were in our 20’s and 30’s
  3. for money and success any time it was offered.
- We stand before Elijah or whatever prophet God calls before us, because we know that we have sold ourselves. . . ***How will we respond when we are called on the carpet about it?*** You can see the person before you, arms crossed, tapping their foot, saying “well?!!”

Dr. Winkler points out: *We have to pay attention to the voices through whom God speaks, the Elijahs and the poets and novelists and preachers, the visionaries and the victims who tell us that life amounts to more than what we acquire, more than whom we know, more than the places we go and the food we eat.*

**Yet, the question remains, how do we respond when we are called on the carpet about our having “sold ourselves”, not being true to the “image of God” that is within us?**

- Often we try to justify ourselves by having done the *right* things in life. We were *moral (to a point)*, we were *generous* and considered others before ourselves (*at times*). . . ***nobody’s perfect!***

- True enough, as St. Paul says it “*we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*”. So then how do we break through to a life where we can be our **true self again**? How do we once again know the innocence of the garden of Eden before the fall? ***How can we be redeemed to God and one another?***

For this question, I’d like to suggest we take a close look at the story from Luke’s gospel about the “sinful woman”.

- First of all, what does it mean that she was a “sinner”? Many have assumed this meant she was a prostitute. But the text does not say that.
- “Sinner” could refer to a number of things, from being ritually unclean (having her period), to be pregnant out of marriage (like Mary in the birth story of Jesus from Luke’s gospel), to being a murderer.
- She obviously let down her hair to wipe Jesus feet, which in Jewish culture is only something a proper woman did in a bedroom setting. So by letting down her hair she showed herself to be a “sinner”, acting in a social scandalous way!

When Jesus is questioned by his host as to why this woman is allowed to touch him, he responds with a parable which speaks of God’s mercy which appears greater to those who have lost much than those who have lost little. He then chides his host for not having offered him the most basic hospitality as he entered his home. In effect, the host was a sinner as well!

Then Jesus makes what some believe to be an odd statement that “*her sins, which were many, have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love.*”

- **The woman has shown that she has received the redemption of God by exhibiting love.**
- Why was she weeping? It is often assumed that she was weeping in repentance for her sins. Yet, Joseph Fitzmeyer points out that “*It could also have been weeping for joy at the realization of the forgiveness of her sins by God that she has already experienced.*” (p. 689)

- Jesus says to the woman ***“your faith has saved you, go in peace.”***

**How has her faith saved her?** I think she found faith in the *only one* who is capable of changing her, forgiving her, loving her in the deepest reaches of her being. The “sinful” woman had faith in the Ancient of days who had given her the power to change on the inside as well as her behaviors on the outside, God had redeemed her.

- When Jesus says “go in peace your sins have been forgiven” *it is not so much of a pronouncement as a statement of fact.* Her sins had already been forgiven, she had been redeemed, which was evidenced by her act of humility and adoration of God by honoring the one who is embodying the message of redemption, Jesus, the anointed one, the messiah.
- Jesus, from the name “Joshua” which means literally, “God saves”. That’s the key isn’t it? **God saves, God is the only one who can save us, deep inside our tormented minds and guts and in spite of our torturous experiences in life. God is the only one who can save us, after we have sinned and “sold ourselves” for popularity or riches or comfort.**

This is not unlike the story of Paul on the road to Damascus and the time that followed his “seeing the light”. ***God changed Paul on the inside, which subsequently changed his actions on the outside.***

- This is why Paul writes that *“we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. . . it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ to lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*
- Paul was “redeemed” and so preached a message of “redemption” that did not come from human sources but from God, which he knew through *his own life experience.*

In closing, I must note one more gem from Luke’s gospel. We have the opportunity for a little glimpse into the life of the band that followed Jesus. Luke tells us about Mary, called Magdalene (from who Jesus cast out seven demons – not a prostitute as some would lead us to believe); Joanna, wife of Chuza (a slave of Herod); and Susanna and others (presumably women) who provided for Jesus and his disciples out of their resources.

- No doubt, from Luke’s point of view, these women were synonymous

with the proclamation of Jesus, absolutely and utterly indispensable in supporting this ministry.

- I don't think from Luke's perspective it would be an overstatement to say that without these women some of who were also the first ones to show up at the empty tomb, (see Luke 24:10) the Jesus movement may very well not have survived.

These women, St. Paul, as well as the "sinful woman" who anointed Jesus' feet in the story today, knew what Billy meant in Eugene O'Neill's play, *I don't want justice, I want love*.

**Don't we all, Billy . . . Don't we all?** *May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his son, Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen*