

To hell with worthiness

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July 26th, 2009

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

If you were writing scripture about your most famous and beloved king would you tell this story that we heard Samuel tell us about David??

Why on earth did the story of King David's adulterous, murderous lust make it into our scriptures? Why did our Jewish forebears keep telling and re-telling this story? David is the man after God's heart. David is the line from whom the Messiah will come. David is capable of vicious, ugly, lies and deceit.

If this was your cultural Icon of God wouldn't you want to airbrush him a little? Where are the spin doctors who make the story fit for public consumption? This is the kind of leak that politicians dread.

This is the Bible. This is the sacred story that contains the seeds of our own transformation. Why did David's adultery make the cut?

I am convinced that it is because we need to be reminded over and over and in the most shocking way possible that religion is not a worthiness contest. The bible is NOT an owner's manual that is concerned with giving directions for proper outward behaviour. It is not about being good so God will love you. That is backwards. It is because we are loved that we can be good. The whole trajectory of scripture is to reveal God's love for us. More than that, it reveals that our True selves are actually one with God. We carry That Of God in our hearts and our destiny is, as John says in his Gospel, to become sons and daughters of God.

Now, I'm going to talk about some trajectories I perceive in our scripture passages today. But, remember, the whole question is how does these trajectories of scripture fit with the revelation of God that you have experienced in your own lives! How are the stories and writings we study today about you too? The most important thing I say to the children during the children's talk is this: I wonder which part of the story is about you or which part you are in.

Christianity, like Judaism, has struggled with this idea of worthiness. So much of our thinking goes like this: If I am good and follow the rules then God will love me and good things will happen to me. No wonder that so many people walk away from the church because their rule following and fervent prayers seem not to result in good things happening. The pain of the world inevitably comes and we have nothing more than to

offer 'if you play by the rules then God will love you.' This creates the anti-religious atmosphere of God being absent when there is pain, either because I have failed or because there is no God.

You and I must examine where this small version of faith resides in us. It is in all of us somewhere. We have literally breathed in that mechanical understanding of God from so many sources in our culture.

There is a palpable difference to how this feels, I think. What is the difference between acting so that God will love you rather than acting because you have known the love of God. One way I am responding to my perceived scarcity. The other I am acting out of my perceived abundance. Which feels more like your experience of peace and forgiveness to you? Find that place.

If we spend some time thinking about what that system of trying to be worthy implies we can see how off the rails it is. It implies that we can control God. It implies that behind all the outward deference and piety and smiling and being nice and cleaning my room and walking old ladies across the street is the sense that I can make God love me; That I can control how God responds to me. That is a small God. This is not the God that could create the Universe, it is a God of dysfunctional parenting whose love and attention we have to compete for and earn.

This is why Jesus had such a problem with the Pharisees, they thought they could follow the rules to find God. Remember the story Luke tells of the tax collector and the Pharisee in the temple.... "all who exalt themselves (try to control God) will be humbled and all who are humble will be exalted (become like God)."

This kind of thinking is everywhere in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. WHY? It is there because it is IN US and we need to see it for what it is. The God of the Old Testament is the same God of Jesus. God doesn't change but we do. God is steadfast love. God redeems us out of slavery and brings us to freedom. But part of our journey to freedom means seeing ourselves in the unfolding of the story. The Bible chronicles the journey of consciousness towards finding ourselves in Christ that we must all undertake personally and collectively. In fact, the Hebrew scriptures themselves have their own progression and coherence– the book of Job is precisely the kind of wisdom that shatters the illusion of rule following our way to God.

Because we need the story it means that we can't sanitize the tough parts. They are supposed to be difficult. But we must be confronted with them because they represent our own shadow. When we judge the writers or the culture as misguided we are seeking to distance ourselves from seeing the part of us that is just like that. This is why the psalms have been used for 1800 years as the basic practice of the vocation of being transformed in Christ. Because they contain all the light and all the shadow that is my condition and is the human condition. Think of the story John tells of the woman caught in adultery. We have caught David in adultery. We have caught the psalmist hating his enemies. Let you who are without sin throw the first stone. Jesus says plainly what the

whole scripture is inviting us to do. We must see ourselves in each other – both the light and the shadow.

You see, the Bible is not about becoming worthy. None of us is worthy. But, what the trajectory of scripture is trying to reveal is that whether or not I am worthy is fundamentally the wrong question. The question is whether or not I can accept the love of God. This is Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus and it is a prayer for us too!

Ephesians 3: 14-21

This is a tricky thing, accepting the love of God. And to deal authentically with the worthiness issue we must peel back a couple layers. I just said none of us is worthy but doesn't my claim that we are beloved of God mean that we are inherently good. Yes. Both. It is true that we are unworthy. It is true that we are infinitely worthy. David is both the man after God's own heart and the heartless adulterer. We too are beloved as children of God and yet constantly causing pain to other children.

It is the part of us that seeks so hard to claim worthiness that is in fact unworthy. That small part of ourselves, Paul calls it the flesh, we might call it 'ego' in today's psychology, but whatever we call it, it is at root the same 'me first' thinking. It is always and forever unworthy because it seeks to build itself up and feel ok and superior to the others that we have put down as inferior. But at the same time as being unworthy it is held by God's love. Our unworthiness is not the end of the story. God uses it to break down our walls that keep us from finding our deepest Self, which is also God. This is part of the human journey, it is why we need to see it at work in the great character's of the Bible. It is something we all must transform so that our True Self can be revealed.

The real twist is that we can begin this work when we become aware of a worthiness and chosenness that is based not on who we are or what we have done but rather just because we exist. When we experience this unmerited, unconditional love, we are free to see the unworthiness of our small self for what it is. The Bible is pointing out to us again and again, explicitly and implicitly, that who we think we are and who we really are ARE NOT THE SAME THING. Our ability to be healed and to heal, to be blessed and to bless, gets greater and greater the more we can shift the centre of our living from who we think we are to who we really are.

I can't convince you of this, you must experience it. If you experience that reality and are aware of doing so then nothing else will do. Living water. We thirst for living water. You have all experienced it. It is there in your lives. It is there in scripture to help us find ourselves in the mirror of the Davids and the Pauls.

The church has often done a pretty shoddy job of bringing people to an awareness of this experience and then helping them unpack it. BUT, the central practices of the Christian faith are meant to help us engage this too-good-to-be-true-that-I-can-barely-believe-it mystery. Baptism is the image of dying to our old selves and being reborn in Christ. It is a symbol of our deepest Self and Life being found in God. It doesn't happen all at once.

We spend our lives trying to shift and live from the reality that baptism points us to. But it powerfully reveals who we really are and can be a reference point for the journey.

Eucharist does too. We have the image of Jesus feeding the multitudes that John uses to set up his understanding of Eucharist. The story is on one level so clearly pointing towards God's ability to take our smallness, our scarcity, our five barley loaves and two fish, our desperate attempts at worthiness, and transform it all into the abundance of 12 baskets full, the abundance of the reality that who I really am is never separate from God, the abundance that frees us to quit trying to be worthy and simply to accept the worthiness that is our birthright. God, in Jesus, reveals God's character. Love is giving itself away with reckless abandon for the sake of love. This is the signification of bread throughout scripture. God gives Israel manna from heaven, God gives the whole world Jesus who is the bread of life, Jesus gives us bread in his ministry and finally with his own body. This is all the same bread. It is all the love of God.

This too is your story. Today, in the Eucharist we go to the cross with Jesus, holding on to the reality our baptism proclaimed and most likely not feeling and knowing it fully right now. We come as Davids, all of us, people after God's own heart and adulterers in one way or another. We come not because we are worthy but because we are loved. But we go to the cross in faith, giving thanks for the love that is given to us and all the people of God and praying that we might be open to this gift that has already been given to us, and receiving that bread and that abundance so that we too may give ourselves to each other. The means are the ends. It is in giving away the love that we are given more and more.

This is what we begin to live into at baptism. It takes on practical significance once we can choose conscious acts of love (Merton, NS, 41). Love that seeks no reciprocity, love that requires no change, love that doesn't count the cost, love that forgets that is loving. How do you do it? I'm not exactly sure but if we dig a little our tradition has some great starting points. I think it will cost you who you think you are, I think the answer has to do with how we pray and what ways we choose to practice living every day as well as what we do Sunday mornings. I know that it begins with baptism and is sustained by the Eucharist. I know that it is a journey that nobody can undertake for you. I know that there is no other journey worth taking.