

March 14; Lent 4C 2010
Joshua 5:9-12; Ps 32
2 Cor 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-2, 11b-32

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“The Lord said to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.” (Josh 5:9)

In 1854, Chief Seattle, the leader of the Suquamish Indians who lived in what is now the state of Washington, was asked by the governor of those territories to surrender his ancestral tribal lands to the white settlers and to retreat with his tribe to a reservation. In reply, he gave a speech which was translated from his own language into Chinook and then into English. After acknowledging that his tribesmen had little real choice, Seattle allegedly said:

Our good father in Washington... sends us word that if we do as he desires he will protect us. His brave warriors will be to us a bristling wall of strength, and his wonderful ships of war will fill our harbors, so that our ancient enemies ...will cease to frighten our women, children, and old men. Then in reality he will be our father and we his children. But can that ever be? Your God is not our God! Your God loves your people and hates mine! He folds his strong protecting arms lovingly about the paleface and leads him by the hand as a father leads an infant son. But, He has forsaken His Red children, if they really are His. Our God, the Great Spirit, seems also to have forsaken us. Your God makes your people wax stronger every day. Soon they will fill all the land. Our people are ebbing away like a rapidly receding tide that will never return. The white man's God cannot love our people or He would protect them. They seem to be orphans who can look nowhere for help. How then can we be brothers?¹

How, then, can we be brothers? From the time of Cain and Abel, it has been, perhaps, *the* question which haunts scripture: how can we be brothers? How can we be kin, when some have more and others less, when some seem to enjoy perennial favor, and others seem to lose at everything they set their hand to? Chief Seattle's bitterness emerges from a deep sense of disgrace: his people are dying; their land is lost to them; even their god seems to have turned his back. The condition of his people is as abject as that of the Hebrews in Egypt. How, then, can such disgrace be rolled away?

For the Native Americans, of course, it wasn't. We no longer think of them as culpable; we no longer use words like “savage,” but in any sane reading of history, they are the ones who lost. In fact, if you let your mind range through the secular history you know, there are almost no examples of disgrace being taken away. There is forgiveness -- extended daily so that we can go on living. There is amendment of life, cases in which people become better. There is healing of people who were broken. But disgrace -- bone-deep shame and dishonor that is known by everyone who is anyone -- *that* tends not to go away. Even when a person is cleared of accusation, suspicion lingers, whispers behind hands held carefully to mouths, *there must have been something there*. In modern times, perhaps only Nelson Mandela has known true vindication. In more ancient times, it is hard to think of anyone. And yet, God says to Joshua, “Today I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.”

And what was that disgrace? Captivity. Subjection to the will of others. Being made to suffer cruelty. Deprivation of autonomy. Public scorn. An inversion of values which made even the brave cry of a newborn infant a cause for fear. Systematically, the Hebrews were deprived of everything that allows a person to be human: Self-determination. Hope. Joy in new life. A Sabbath for reflection and rest. The right to earn a reputation of their own. Like prisoners in a gulag, shaved, numbered, and dressed in uniforms, they were made interchangeable: mere tools for doing

¹ Chief Seattle, as transcribed by Dr. Henry A. Smith. Several versions of this speech exist, including a more-familiar modern re-write; this is the oldest version, and the only one produced by an eyewitness.

Pharaoh's work. But people are not interchangeable. For us, to live and breathe on the earth is to do so differently from every other person who has ever existed. Take that away, and you take away our very selves. From such wreckage, can new life be born again?

Not, perhaps, within secular human culture, but our ways are not God's ways. St. Paul writes, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view." (2 Cor 5:16) A human point of view lets us see one another through a field of partial knowledge. We see what we think we see, what we have been taught to see. We do not see one another's lives complete. We do not know what is in another's heart. We do not know how to erase the disgrace of another. But Paul continues, "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor 5:17) To see through God's eyes is to see one another with perfect knowledge, for "the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sam 16:7) We do not know how to ease one another's disgrace, but in Christ, it has already been done. In Christ, you are already a new creation: Fresh. Clean. Green with new life. Shooting up toward the Son who gives you life.

In three weeks, we will stand in this place and listen to a strange story -- a story about rolling away the stone from a tomb. We will watch the flickering torches gilding the acolytes' faces, and we will hear of angels and weeping women and of a dead body that could not be found. In that one act, Christ rolls away our dis-grace, our un-grace, our plight of being taken only at the worth we think we see in one another, of not being viewed with the generosity of God. For our God is a God who gives with open hands from an open heart: God always sees with generosity, giving to us the grace we lack so that we can be in truth as beautiful as God thinks we are. So that we can be brothers and sisters to one another.

The Prodigal Son is a story of forgiveness, but it is more than that. It comes in the Gospel of Luke amid a stream of stories about giving up our possessions. First, our assumption that we are honored: When we attend a party, Christ tells us to sit, not at the head of the table, but at the lowest place. Then, our desire for fairness: when we give a banquet, we are to invite the poor, the lame, the crippled, those who cannot invite us back. Finally, Christ says it outright: "None of you can become my disciple unless he gives up all his possessions." (Luke 14:33)

But neither the prodigal nor his brother is willing to give up anything! The younger son demands what is to be his even before his father dies. The older carries about with him a bitter grudge against his scapegrace sibling, a grudge which means more to him than honor or joy or kinship. And he carries about himself a grudge against his father also, a grudge which manifests itself in perfect obedience so that he does not have to owe his father *anything*. Grudges like this are a form of power; they are the leverage we hold over one another.

But our Father is One who doesn't care about our grudges. God does not mind standing beneath us if that is the way to lift us up to heaven. God does not mind running out into the road to seek us, hauling in strangers to fill his banquet-hall, taking the least place at the table if only we will be his guests. Grudges give leverage only if we are not willing to humble ourselves before one another. But God *was* humility. Christ Jesus "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death -- even death on a cross." (Phil 2:6-8)

My friends, we are halfway through Lent. Already the angel is winging toward the tomb of Christ. Already, the ground of our world is shaking with new life. In a few short weeks, we will watch the stone of our disgrace roll away from our tomb, and we will stand in the light of a new day, in the dawn of a new creation. We can enter that new day with hands and hearts open to receive the gift of God, or we can enter it like the older son, hands clenched around our grievances, willing, perhaps, to accept life, but not willing to allow root-room for others to live. The choice is ours.

A few years ago, a German film-maker released a movie called *Into Great Silence*, a documentary about the lives of Carthusian monks in France. In one scene, a novice is clothed and enters into the monastery. He stands before the altar and makes his first vows; he kneels at the feet of every man in the room, each of whom raises him up and embraces him; then the other monks lead him to his cell and pray over him, admonishing him to live at the disposal of God alone, in “everlasting prayer and joyful penitence.” I had never before thought that penitence could be a joyful thing, but, of course, it is the gift of God: the door God holds open to us so that we can shed the withered skin of our disgrace and be born into God’s new creation. To see penitence that way is to let go of the grudges we hold: both the ones we hold against one another and our resentment at having to change our ways. To see penitence that way is to see in it the gateway to restored relationships: to hearts made whole, to stilted conversation become suddenly rich, to those from whom we were alienated running to embrace us on the road.

After the novice is clothed, there is one phrase which echoes through the film: *Chère frere. Chère frere. Dear Brother. Dear brother. Dear brother.* For these men who live in penitence, there can be only mutual concord, *for that is all they will allow to exist.* They will see no one from a human point of view, but only as a brother in Christ. That is their choice, and they choose it every day. How, then, can we be brothers? By making the same choice, by refusing to see one another as less than Christ, by refusing to be anything but a brother. We can refuse to say to God “my Father,” and say only, “Our Father.”² With God, all things are possible.

² St. Augustine, quoted by Marilynne Robinson in “Marguerite de Navarre,” *The Death of Adam*.