

The Problem of Guilt

The Rev Janie Donohue

March 14, 2010 - Lent 4, Year C

When I was a junior at Northwestern in Evanston IL, I and a few of my undergraduate colleagues were offered the privilege of taking a graduate seminar in family systems theory. It was a small group of mostly older, returning students. We sat at tables in a horseshoe formation, to facilitate discussion. It never took long in such settings for people to figure out that I was a Christian. I mention this because there was a lecture one day that is burned into my memory. The professor was addressing the group and the subject was guilt. She postulated that debilitating guilt was her most common and most inscrutable therapeutic challenge. Here she was, a well respected clinician, and yet she was stymied. She seemed defeated and sad for her clients to whom she felt incapable of offering relief. And then she said it. I remember the moment so clearly. Where I was sitting. her hairstyle and her posture. She posed the question “how do you get rid of guilt?” The question hung in the air. But then she said it again, and I realized she had been looking straight at me. “How *do* you? Janie, I know you are a person of faith. Tell me. How do you help people become free of guilt?”

As the youngster in the group, I was unnerved, but proceeded to offer as concise and compelling a summary of the Christian story as I could piece together. I don't remember what happened after that. I remember I didn't do a very good job, in my own estimation anyway. But the reason that class remains seared in my memory is that at that moment, in that pregnant pause, in a room full of fairly impressive academics, it was then that I caught a glimpse of the power of Christian hope. It was my first encounter with such a palpable hunger for redemption and release. It would be the first of many. And *that day* I knew in the core of my being that the call to share the good news included more than a commitment to live as a good example. My baptismal commitment, embraced again at confirmation, made a new kind of sense. *Will you proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? I will with God's help.* It is a promise we all make.

So here we are in the heart of Lent. Our lectionary today offers us stories of redemption and rescue. Sin and forgiveness. During Lent we are reminded of our true nature. This can be disquieting even startling. Uncomfortable.

I think part of why we are sometimes unsettled or even startled by the darkness we encounter during Lent, surprised by the volume and depth of our sin, is because on some level, we thought we were a lot closer to “arrived” than we truly are. We are good people, at times very good, but not quite righteous. We don't do or sell drugs, we're not in prison, we are good parents... So we are taken aback by our deep moral failures, because we thought we were close. Perhaps we carried an internal list of one or two areas where we were falling short. Maybe gossip. A bad temper. Failure to give sacrificially. Fear. Things we'll fix this Lent or New Year's. We are

startled when given a clearer view, because while we knew that we had not arrived, our internal moral GPS told us that righteousness was three streets up on the left.

Maybe this does not ring true at all. Maybe you know darn well you are not even remotely close. And yet we still consider moral accomplishment the goal, one we have failed desperately to achieve. Perhaps, then, we have become adept at the well crafted wallow. We're not worthy. Often when we are truly still and open to the Holy Spirit, we catch glimpses of truths we just can't handle, so we take it in and then *linger*. We roll around in the mud, with the prodigal son's pigs, confessing again and again the same things, as if God didn't really get just how bad and dark our true acts and motives are. No matter, we will help God understand.

Both of these self oriented lenten strategies, either self flagellation or the illusion of a few moral "loose ends," both are what the apostle Paul calls the human point of view. *From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*

Salvation is not something we accomplish with elbow grease. It is the work of God first in creation and then in sending Christ when we like sheep had gone astray. Christ put to death this human thinking. Now all things are new. We are forgiven, redeemed and restored because of God's acts and character, not ours.

So what is this whole new world? It is the dream of God. The dream of a father whose beloved son was dead and then came to life, who was lost and now is found. It is God who draws us, who longs to connect with us. To be in good relationship with us, again as in the beginning. It is God who reaches for the robe of fine linen and kills the fatted calf. And that unfathomable embrace has absolutely nothing to do with our moral striving. As Paul says, *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, not counting our trespasses against us.* Well, there it is, your Christian hope. There it is, the answer to my professor's question. God does not count your trespasses against you, and so who are you to cling to guilty self-deprecation. Christ is your righteousness, not you. Cause honey, I hate to break it to you, but you are not close.

So why bother, right? What then is the place of moral action? Once restored, we seek to live in harmony with Christ and one another as an *expression* of our restored relationship with God. We are drawn by God back into that intimate communion. It is that restoration of which we are called to speak. From that love-soaked, humble place, Christ asks us to invite others in, so that they might experience this abundant life. A life of freedom from guilt. Freedom from shame. A life of gratitude and energy--the fruit of ceasing to strive. Energy that makes us available for deeds of service and yes, moral modeling.

And yes, speech. Words. Telling the story--our own and THE story of salvation history and God's incomprehensible love. Paul explains to the believers that *God is entrusting the message*

of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.

But know this, neither speaking the truth nor living rightly is our primary charge. It is instead to be reconnected with God. To be healed, freed and restored to our loving, gentle papa. To the king. For it is his nature which is the ground of all loving. This is why, in sum and above all else, Paul entreats them *on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God*. This is the point. This is the answer. Be found. Be loved. Let go of your guilt and shame and be reconciled. You are not close. And you do not have to eat with the pigs. For in Christ you are a new creation. Come near. Allow the Lord to place the robe on your shoulders. It is God's dream and your destiny. Dare to live in it, this day and forevermore. *Amen.*