

Monday in the 15th Week after Pentecost September 9, 1985

Lk 7:1-8,14-15,21-23

Last week the first day of the orientation program for new students was organized around worship, and we began that first day with the order of confession and absolution.

There was a time when I wouldn't have thought confession and absolution was a very good way to introduce students to their new school. It would have seemed to me like a negative beginning, a downer, when what we needed was something positive and celebrative.

As on a lot of other things, on this one I've changed my mind. Because it seems to me that students and faculty and staff at a seminary share a big problem. At all academic institutions it seems important to everybody to be smart, or at least to look smart. At seminaries you have to be good too. I think we feel a lot of pressure to be smart and be good. We're supposed to be intellectual, spiritual, and moral exemplars, models, superpersons.

And that's a big problem. Because the fact is that we can never be smart enough or spiritual enough or morally good enough to satisfy our image of what we ought to be. We know ourselves too well. And that's a big problem.

You know how people handle problems like that, when they are anxious because their sense of self-worth has been threatened or appears to be under threat. When people feel that kind of pressure they play games with themselves and with the people around them. They are reluctant to look dumb by ever admitting when they don't know something. Students sometimes keep safely silent in class; faculty sometimes restrict class discussion to subjects in which their competence is unquestioned. Besides, when people feel under threat, they may turn their fears about themselves into attacks on each other. Students attack faculty for irrelevance or lousy teaching methods. Faculty attack students for their lack of intellectual rigor. Students attack each other for dimwitted statements made in class or in the dorm. All of this because they are scared of seeming or being dumb.

But what about the need to be good? I think one way it shows up is in our reluctance to apply Gospel readings like the one for this week to ourselves. "It may be that some people's hearts are repositories for evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, but not mine." "Of course, I may have my

foibles and I could list them, but it wouldn't look like Jesus' list. I mean I may be sluggish about getting up in the morning; I may get my papers turned in late; I may show mild chagrin inappropriately from time to time; I may be guilty of little extravagances like an occasional movie or Haagen Dasz ice cream cone (2 dips too); I must confess to sliding through stop signs once in a while. But fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness,-- me?!! (3:16) One of my daughters, who's a high school senior this year, told me she was assigned Sophocles' play, Oedipus the King, in her English class. She asked me if I wanted to read it with her. So we sat on the living room sofa acting out the parts and using different voices for the different characters.

You may know the story: An oracle foretells that Oedipus will one day kill his father and marry his mother, a prophecy which, through long circuitous circumstances, actually comes to pass. We pick up the story with Oedipus reigning as king of Thebes and unknowingly married to his own mother Jocasta. The city is suffering from a plague, and when Oedipus learns that the suffering is the city's punishment for harboring the murderer of its former king Laius (Oedipus' father, though he doesn't know it), Oedipus declares proudly:

I stand forth as champion of God
and of the man who died.
Upon the murderer I invoke this curse--
may he wear out his life
in misery!
I command all to drive him from this land,
since he is our pollution, as the oracle
of God proclaimed him to me now.

Of course subsequent slowly emerging revelations point the finger more and more obviously at Oedipus himself, who in his growing terror, becomes more and more hostile to his accusers.

The seer Teiresias, only under compulsion, finally declares to Oedipus:

You are the murderer of the king
whose murderer you seek.

Oedipus responds not by repenting, but by trying to shift the blame, accusing Teiresias and Jocasta's brother Creon of being in cahoots to cover up their own murder of Laius and to implicate Oedipus instead.

You, sir, how is it you come here? Have you so much brazen-faced daring that you venture in my house although you have proved manifestly the murderer of that man, and though you tried, openly, highway robbery of my crown? For God's sake, tell me what you saw in me, what cowardice or what stupidity, that made you lay a plot like this against me?

And so on.

In the Gospels the Pharisees are represented as looking only on the surface of things, we could say as persons who were content to look only at overt behaviors and conscious motives. Jesus, by contrast, looked into people's hearts. He was interested in the covert, concealed content of people's behaviors and their unconscious, perhaps unrecognized motives. While the Pharisees busied themselves with the purification of hands and dishes, Jesus saw that clean hands didn't necessarily imply a pure heart. Whatever pollution afflicted human beings was inside. People might honor God with their lips, but what about their hearts?!!

The myth of Oedipus and the story of Jesus confront us with the truth about ourselves, a truth even about seminary professors, seminary staff, seminarians and future pastors, and their devoted families. However much we may wish to protest our claims to moral purity and spiritual maturity, welling up out of our unconscious, assaulting our consciousness are all the awful things we wish were not true about ourselves. Murder? Can we deny our passing impulses to strangle parents, siblings, teachers, rivals, professional preparation committees? Theft? So we really don't intend to steal an education or a job or a reputation or a call? Fornication? Who is not assaulted more often than he or she wants to admit with the most bizarre sexual dreams and fantasies?

Such it is to be human. We can suppress the truth about all that we are, but we are nonetheless what we are, conscious and unconscious, head and hands and heart.

But just as we are God loves us all. I think God even takes pleasure in us. The Gospel declares that God forgives us everything, affirms us, places God's love on us, makes us God's own, demonstrates God's delight in us, calls us to God's service. Yep, you and me. That's why Luther, with his usual wry way of putting things, told the scrupulous Melancthon to sin boldly. He

meant to go ahead and be the human person he was with all the vitality and the boldness of faith in a gracious god that he could muster. As we begin the academic year together I trust we'll follow Luther's good and salutary advice.