

Ash Wednesday Reflection

Forgiveness, Part 4: The Root of All Evil & the Fount of Every Blessing

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Scripture: Matthew 5:6

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed Are the Who, for What??

One of the reasons why interfaith dialog and relationships have played a central role in my ministry is that, nearly every time I have a deep conversation with someone of another faith, I not only learn something new about *their* faith, but my own.

It happens the other way around, too. I had a Zoom conversation the other day with a new Hindu friend I made on the Gandhi 3.0 retreat who lives in Austin, TX. We were comparing notes about what our respective faiths teach about a number of things. Before signing off, the friend said, “Thank you for this conversation. You have helped me become a better Hindu.” I felt the same way about him.

Where I experienced this kind of relationship most profoundly was while serving on the Tri-Faith Initiative Commons in Omaha, Nebraska (www.trifaith.org). Each week provided new opportunities for conversations with Jews and Muslims. When I left the Tri-Faith Initiative, I told people the experience had made me 20% more Christian, 20% more Jewish, and 20% more Muslim. I meant it!

This evening, we’re going to draw on some wisdom from Islam, actually, to help us interpret a curious statement made by Jesus in his famous Beatitudes – those “blessed be” statements that begin his Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus teaches, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” To be “righteous” here means to be in “right relationship with God.”

Certainly, Jesus’s audience would have expected him to say the opposite. That is, “Blessed are *the righteous*, for they are filled.” Instead, Jesus claims that those who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness are blessed. That is, those who are far enough out of alignment with God that it has made them uncomfortable, creating a powerful yearning to be more fully in alignment.

Of course, it’s not like Jesus is *against* righteousness! Yet he was also *for* his followers making a sober, realistic assessment of how closely they are in alignment with God’s will and intent for their lives. For most any of us who are sincerely trying to follow, this kind of assessment leaves us praying more fervently to be more fully aligned. Not necessarily because we uncover so much

horrible stuff about ourselves, but because whenever we spend more than a casual amount of time considering God and our lives, we tend to become aware of how enormously we are blessed, even within great struggles. And we tend to see how much more blessed than cursed we are in this life, yet how much we have been focused on the curses over the blessings.

The Holy Man on the Hill

There is an Islamic tale I once heard from my imam friend on the Tri-Faith Commons that I think of often. Once, there was a holy man who spent 500 years on top of a mountain doing nothing but praying and offering praise to Allah. The only times he ever came down from the mountain were to perform his ritual purifications in the river and carry up water for drinking and further purification.

At the end of 500 years, the Angel of Death appeared, informing the holy man that it was his time to pass on and be judged whether or not he was worthy to enter Paradise. The Angel asked him, “Do you wish to be judged according to the merits of your good works, or according to Allah’s compassion and grace?”

Realizing that he had spent 500 straight years doing nothing but pray and offer praise to Allah, the holy man felt confident that he had had built up more than enough merit to earn his way into heaven. “I stand on the merit of my works,” he declared.

The Angel of Death then produced the Scale of Balance. In the left pan, the angel placed all the prayers and praise and good works that the holy man had done for 500 years. Then, the angel reached out his hand, plucked out one of the man’s eyeballs, and placed it into the right pan. The right side hit the ground with a thud! That single eyeball vastly outweighed the man’s 500 years of righteous works.

The moral of the story? If given the choice between entering heaven based on your good works, or God’s grace, for heaven’s sake, choose grace!

Doesn’t this story sound like one that could have been told by Jesus? We know from the gospels that, as loving and compassionate as Jesus was – even to “prostitutes, tax collectors and sinners” – there is one group of people Jesus was particularly hard on: the self-righteous.

The Islamic tale of the holy man helps me look out at the world through the eyes of Jesus a bit more clearly. What Jesus saw was certain people weighing their own good works against those of others, and judging these others with self-righteous indignation.

What these righteous people should have been doing was not weighing their good works against those of others, but against the good that God had given them. Had they made an honest self-assessment this way, it would have dropped even the most righteous among them to their knees in a heartbeat.

I wonder how this view of life would affect us, if we compared our own good works not with the works of others, but with the good that God has done for us? Would our energies be so heavily invested in judging the person who votes differently than we do, or who acted unkindly toward us,

or who are not as “woke” as we are? Or, like Gandhi, would we invest our energies instead on “being the change we wish to see in the world”?

Oh, but it is so much easier to judge and condemn others for their lack of righteousness than to judge and change ourselves, isn't it? When it comes right down to it, that feeling of self-righteous indignation is a powerful drug. It shoots a heady concoction of chemicals into our brains that is far more addictive than most any drug.

Nearly all of us human beings are like addicts when it comes to the drug of self-righteous indignation. We drink a single shot of that booze, and before we know it, the whole bottle is drained. That little shot of brain chemicals may very well result in a few hours spent on a self-righteous indignation trip.

Self-righteous indignation comes with a nasty hangover, too. That's why people are so quick to take another shot when their head starts pounding. Turn on Fox News, or MSNBC, depending on your politics. Open the newspaper. Check your social media feed. Those new shots of self-righteous indignation can mask a whole lot of fear and self-loathing that resulted from our last binge, at least temporarily.

The Root of All Evil

The Qur'an actually teaches that self-righteous indignation is the root of all evil. According to the Qur'an, after God created humanity, God commanded the host of heaven to bow down, not to God, but to *us humans!*¹

At first, heaven's angels objected. They could see with crystal clarity that humanity was flawed. “These humans will commit evil,” the angels exclaimed, “even murder!”

In response, God assured them, “I know things that you do not.”

This reminder overcame the angels' objections in a heartbeat. While they could see no reason to bow down to humanity using their own wisdom, they knew that God's wisdom was far greater than theirs. Out of respect for God's greater wisdom, therefore, all the angels bowed down before us.

The only exception was Satan, known as Iblis in Islam. In Islamic mythology, Iblis is not actually an angel but a *jinn*. That is, a spirit being who has freewill. In Islamic mythology, angels have no freewill, but only ever act according to what God commands. Since we human beings have freewill, we are more like Iblis than angels in this regard.

Only, we are so much lower down the spiritual totem pole than Iblis that he used our lowly status as the basis of his refusal to bow down to us. He objected, “I am made of smokeless

¹This story is recounted in bits and pieces in seven places in the Qur'an: *Al-Baqarah* 2.28, *Al-A`Rāf* 7.11, *Al-Hijr* 15.29, *Al-Isrā'* 17.61, *Al-Kahf* 18.50, *Tā' Hā'* 20.116, and *Al-Qasas* 28.71

fire! These humans are made of mere dirt!” How could he, as a higher-order being of so much greater perfection ever bow to lowly humanity?

Do you remember the expression, “Johnny was right. Dead right. But now he is as dead as he was right”?

Iblis was right about his own righteousness compared to ours. Dead right. But his self-righteous indignation toward us led him to be dead wrong about what truly mattered. That is, God’s love for us.

In refusing to bow down to us, Iblis was really refusing to bow down to God – that is, that part of God that Iblis did not fully understand. (God: “*I know things that you do not.*”) He did not honor God’s greater wisdom. Nor did he honor God’s fierce love for God’s imperfect creations.

Do you hear the import of this story? If you yourself have honestly become much more righteous than those around you, this fact alone is not impressive to God. You must also honor and respect the fact that God, in God’s own wisdom – wisdom that you do not have access to – God chose to create, and love, people who are far from perfect. God loves these people with a fierceness that you don’t want to stand in the way of.

Far better to learn to love this aspect of God that you do not understand. And since none of us were created as higher level human beings than our fellow humans, better still is to realize that, in God’s eyes, the difference between our righteousness and that of even our worst enemies, may not be as great we like to believe it is. The sooner we acknowledge this, the sooner we may experience God’s mysterious love toward *us*.

The Fount of All Blessing

Really, this is what baptism is meant to teach us, and the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday is meant to underscore. To a Christian, the waters of baptism are not waters of purification, they are waters of repentance. This means that we recognize our imperfections, yet we simultaneously acknowledge and receive God’s fierce love for us.

Despite our humanity, and God’s divinity, through baptism each of us hear in our own way, “This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased!” God’s good pleasure in us leads God to choose relationship over perfection every time.

The ashes we place on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday make much the same point. We recognize that we are made of dust – the lowly stuff, not “smokeless fire” like Iblis. To dust we will return. Yet God loves this dust so much that, even though this animated “dust” would later be found guilty for the murder of God’s own Son, God continues to see the good in us that not even we can see. Thus, the offer of forgiveness and full restoration of relationship is always there, and always will be there whenever we turn around and stop running away from God.

[The following story by Dr. Heather Murray Elkins was played on video

at the conclusion of the message]

It was the last day of a pastor's retreat. When [the clergy] had gathered, I had asked them to do an assignment, which was that they were to look through scripture through that three days and find the name that belonged to them, or the story that they couldn't live without. As I had explained to them, Abraham Heschel talks about scripture by saying that we do not say the word, the word utters us. There are pieces of scripture that we belong to. So I had told them that was their assignment to prepare for the closing day.

[That day, we] set up a circle of chairs. We'd put a chair in the middle and we would hear each other, pronounce our names, one by one. All who were there identified the way the word had uttered them. It was growing very well. They were really powerful testimonies that were coming right out of the scripture.

Then, a young man – a young man for ministry anyway – he got up and he came and he sat in the chair and he didn't say anything. And, you know, we waited and we waited, and then it got really uncomfortable and people looking at their watch and feeling a little nervous. And so finally I said to him, "Is there something you would like to share with us? Is there some name or some story?" He didn't look at me. He didn't look at the group. He only looked at his hands.

Then he said, "There are names I wanted. I looked for three days for my name. There are names I wanted, but none of them were strong enough to replace the name that I have – the name that I've been given. I was given this name when I was very young. And it was repeated to me as I grew. My father gave me this name. And then he fell silent again.

After a moment, I said, would you be willing to share what is that name? What is your name? And he said, "My name is Not Good Enough. That's my name. My father gave me that name. And then he began to cry.

We were in that room watching him, and it was like he was drowning right in front of us. Here we are, this whole room full of lifeguards and we don't know what to do!

How to break the power of that name? Then it was, I think, the spirit did its work because it was like a wind or, or maybe just an impulse there. A group of us got up all at once. We got up without making eye contact, and went to where he was on the chair sitting, weeping. We laid hands on him.

Then, it wasn't just one voice, it was several voices like one voice coming up all together, like one flow, one stream. What we said to him, sitting, weeping in our midst with our hands on him was this: "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased." Then we just paused. We just let the blessing rest. Then we all sat down.

When we packed up and finished our business and got ready to go home, I saw him in the parking lot. I went over and I said, I need to know. I really need to know, will that make a difference to you? Will that happen? Make any difference?

He said, "You know, I don't know. I don't know." But he said, "I feel as if something in here [pointing to his heart] was broken, and it isn't now." But he said, "I promise you, every time I put my hands in the [baptismal] water to help name another human being in front of God, I'll remember who I am."

See, I think that's the secret of our baptism.