

Luke 24:36-48 Repentance and Forgiveness  
April 18, 2021

A couple of weeks ago we read the unique ending of the Gospel of Mark. We spoke of how on other Sundays in the Easter season we would be able to focus our attention on the other gospels. Today, we take the opportunity to do just that. In this case, the Gospel of Luke is in view.

Luke is mostly known for its telling of the story of the Road to Emmaus. Attached to the end of that story there is an appearance of Jesus before the gathered disciples in Jerusalem. It is to this account that we now turn.

The text has just been read so you know the particulars. When the Emmaus Road experience was finished the two disciples that had experienced it made their way to Jerusalem where they found the larger group of eleven, and as they related their story, Jesus appeared in the middle of them.

As one might expect they were startled and frightened and the text says they thought he was a ghost. Jesus addressed their fear and disbelief, and after awhile they seemed to settle down - their anxiety and fear replaced by joy and wonder. Jesus began to explain to them the meaning of all that had just happened.

He, “opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures,” and all through the 2,000 years since even the best of his followers have found themselves in

need, from time-to-time, of a mind-opening encounter with Jesus. The gist of things is that it was always necessary for the Christ to suffer and be raised. The result being that “Repentance and forgiveness” would be proclaimed in his name to all nations. Here we are.

Repentance and forgiveness are the biblical solutions to the world’s morality problem. Morality is a word we give to the sense, no matter when or where people live, no matter the circumstances, that there is such a thing as good, there is such a thing as evil; it is a way of asking and answering the question of meaning, that words and actions matter.

Almost everyone expresses the presence of this moral demand in one way or another. It is part of what makes us human. We are drawn to the good, the right, the moral.

On the surface the presence of a moral demand doesn’t seem problematic. But one must only scratch the surface, and sometimes not even that, to be struck by the reality that we, everyone, have a hard time living up to it. In one way or another, we all fail.

Sometimes we fail by willfully disregarding what is good and right and rather blatantly doing the wrong. Sometimes we fail unwittingly, unaware of the harm our words or actions have done, not intending the harm. Sometimes we fail in that frustrating way St. Paul spoke about in the 7th chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, when he wrote, “the good that I want, I do not do; the evil I do not want, this I do.”

Sometimes we find ourselves in situations in which the choices are all bad, and are confronted by the truth that the lesser of two evils is still evil. Even inaction, when we know the good and do not do it, accuses us. Where can one go to escape the moral demand?

In every time and place and culture, there is an attempt at such an escape, a train of thought that denies the whole moral problem, evading its contradictions, rejecting the harm done, attempting some form of vindication, that is, to prove innocence. Human beings are masters of evasion.

Qualifications must be made to account for the way the reality of sin has been used to convince people of a guilt they should not have to bear. It is appropriate for us to admit the abuses of those who have earthly power and who are corrupted by that power, who have abused their authority by using guilt as a means of control. The phenomenon of blaming the victim is real. We must insist that it is enough to take responsibility for whatever wrongs one has done.

In the end, the moral demand and the universal human failure to live up to it, is inescapable. It must be faced. With some thought given to the example and message of Jesus, it can be done in a healthy way.

The gospel solution to the problem of morality is repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is to take responsibility. Part of the spiritual life is to take the space for it in your own life and allow others the space to take it in theirs. And let us think of it more as a

gradual process than of a singular moment in time, in that we allow ourselves and others the grace to stumble, the time for healing and growth, and the grace to be at a different place in their journey than we are in ours.

We must conclude that it is much better to be forgiven than to be vindicated. One might wonder why this is so. Perhaps the best answer is that attempts at vindication only work in situations where one is actually innocent. It is hard and difficult work to ensure from one day to the next, from one situation to the next, that one is always in the right.

Forgiveness is better because it liberates us from all this exhausting work. It sets us free to do the good we can in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, to be released from guilty burdens, and allows us to get off the backs of other people, granting them the space for grace that we have ourselves found. It takes away the burden of tomorrow's perfection. It allows us to function in relationships, which is where meaning is found.

This grace of forgiveness is good news. And it is proclaimed to the far corners of the world just like Jesus told his followers it would be in that Jerusalem room on the first Easter Sunday. May we have ears to hear this message, and voices to speak it, both now and forevermore.

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