

Guilt and Sin

We can read the gospels for years without noticing that they are filled with deeply flawed people, men blinded by selfishness, paralyzed by fear, women caught in adultery or pestering Jesus that he would give her sons the first places in his kingdom. There are lepers, prostitutes, cheats and betrayers. We see Jesus meet them, love them, and send them on healed. This we accept. But we find it so hard to believe it about ourselves. Something seems to block it. We stay trapped by our own dark side, while we quickly gloss over the fears and selfishness of the people we see on every page of the gospels. If we could find out what this block was and face it, perhaps that would let us know the healing love of the Lord.

Suppose we were to take one of these stories to ourselves, stepping into it so that it came alive in our hearts. Perhaps as we entered into the stance of the person in the story we could find out not only how much he or she is like us, but also see what it is in us that blocks us off from the healing touch of Jesus.

Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him, and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do

you say about her?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (John 8:1-11).

I can immediately identify with the woman; and as I enter into the story I enter into her, and her experience easily becomes my own. In fact, her experience awakens me to what has been happening in my depths but what I could not or did not know how to face. I feel myself being dragged out into the open doing something intimately wrong. My loneliness, my desperate need for affection, are there for all to see. How their eyes pierce me, peering into me, examining my shame, my squandered integrity.

Then they leave me there, standing alone in the middle; and I am isolated in my loneliness and shame. I'm cut off from all those standing safely around me. A huge door seems to be slamming shut, cutting me off from family and friends as I wonder in agony, "What will they think?" And God? I can't even look at him. I would hide from them all, but there is nowhere to go where their staring eyes will not seek me out. Then the accusation of their eyes finds words, "This woman has been caught in the act of adultery." That action was unacceptable; she is unacceptable. I hear this accusation and ingest this vision of myself. I make it my own. I am guilty. That is my true reality. Welling up from my depths is a voice that accepts the verdict of my accusers. It is not just that I have done something wrong, something

shameful. I *am* wrong. This brooding sense that all I am is flawed, stained, overwhelms me. This makes me defenseless against the cruel, brutal words and glances that attack me. I'm defenseless because I accept their accusation. I'm cut off from God and others, trapped in my isolation, because I'm not worthy of them. I'm brought face to face with the sense of being not just unnecessary and unneeded, but unwanted, indeed radically unacceptable in my very self. Somehow there is something I have done or overlooked or something wrong with me that makes me unacceptable and that comes out in the terrible things I do. Even when I manage to keep it covered up, as I desperately try to do, it is there at the heart of me. What this is, I'm not quite sure. But I accept this terrible verdict of the pharisees as true and I live under this intolerable burden.

I look at their smug faces and know they are not interested in me, in my pain, my present humiliation and fear or the quiet desperation that has brought me here. They don't care about the burden I have tried to carry. I'm so beaten that I can't even protest against this. They are not interested in me, though my life is in jeopardy; I am only here so they can get at Jesus. Meanwhile Jesus sits there silently. He is the guiltless One. In his presence I am torn. I desperately want him to understand and love me so that this terrible guilty loneliness in which I'm dying will be broken. But if I let him see what I'm really like, won't he have to reject me? For a moment I'm tempted to lash out at him, in a desperate act of self-preservation to turn the accusation back on him. "You're a fraud; you don't love us. You only make us wallow in guilt." But then I listen to his silence. As the story that I am living makes clear, Jesus' silence does not accuse. In the silence he gently reaches out to the poor woman and now to me. He turns aside the accusations that

are breaking me. One by one they go away, beginning with the oldest. At the end I am alone with him. As I stand there before him, the accusations falling away from me, I am changed. I am brought to see that I have been mistaken all along. I am not unnecessary or unneeded. Most of all I am not unacceptable. Who I am is only dawning on me in his silence and under his gaze. I am acceptable to him. I am his beloved. Then he sends me. But the one sent is hardly the one who was dragged in before, for the one who is sent is one who knows he is cherished and has been firmly admonished not to betray that call to be loved and loving. Nor are these mere words, for Jesus' love has healed me, has freed me from the terrible accusation that I am unacceptable. He has revealed to me who I really am: his beloved who is sent into the world.

Being loved and being sent are not two separate things. Ultimately they are one reality. Living within this story brings me to the point where I start to see this in one gospel story after another. For example, the disciples are called into fellowship with Jesus and become fishers of men, which means they are loved and sent. Jesus says to Peter and Andrew, "Come with me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mk. 1:17). After the resurrection Jesus meets a distraught Mary Magdalen in the garden, heals her with his tender love and then tells her, "Go to my brothers, and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, my God and yours" (Jn. 20:17). Indeed, this identity of being loved with being sent, which is the disciples' ultimate identity, finds its radiant symbol in Jesus, the beloved Son sent into the world. We saw something of this before when we looked at Jesus' baptism. At the heart of the good news is the joyful proclamation that Jesus is who you and I are called to be. He is the Father's beloved sent for us; we are

called to be, in Jesus, the Father's beloved sons and daughters sent for the kingdom. The tragedy is that guilt blocks this.

This is what I discover in the midst of the story. Stepping into the place of the woman, at first I am flooded by a pervasive sense of myself as being unacceptable. Here I come to see that the guilty feelings that I experience when I do, or don't do, something are only a surface manifestation of a much deeper reality. They are occasions when I feel bad about what I do; but the root of this is the habitually negative way I feel about who I am. This primordial sense of being guilty proceeds and itself colors these actions, indeed all actions. Another might forgive me for the things I have done; but this forgiveness will come up against this primordial guilt and founder.¹ It cannot break through to free me from my deepest guilt because it never reaches the root of the problem, not what I have done but what I feel I am. On this deeper level I feel perpetually cut off from others and trapped in my own suffocating darkness. Even the presence of Jesus is painful. I experience him as an enigma, as a threat to my guilty life. At first he only makes me feel more guilty, awakening long forgotten and hardly recognized guilt. In the jaws of this guilt I cannot believe he could accept me and so I hide from the one who is what I desperately need to be and can never see myself becoming, the guiltless One, beloved of the Father. I burrow deeper into my own distorted way of living. In a desperate act of self-preservation I am on the brink of turning the accusation I feel on him. I am about to make the pharisees' attack my own. "He's a fraud. He's not holy. He is the sinner; he betrays us." Here I can see something of why they had to kill him. The guiltless One is made guilty for our

sake. He dies condemned as unacceptable before God and man, hung on a tree, so that guilty men can feel safe. This is the great lie.² Just in time the gentle silence of the story where Jesus reaches out to cherish this poor woman touches my heart and this desperate attempt at self-defense falls away. "I don't have to protect myself against him." In a moment he sets my frightened heart free. The lie is exposed. I'm not guilty; I'm loved.

Guilt is experienced here as more than a moral category. It is a metaphysical cancer that eats into my very being. It is an obsessive mood which is virtually identical with a deep and paralyzing forlornness which excludes, or rather repels, human and divine acceptance because it immobilizes us within the conviction that we are unacceptable not just in some of our actions, but in our very being.³ Such endemic guilt, unless it is shattered, renders the past and the future unredeemable and the present a never-ending wasteland filled with accusation. Living within this story can shatter this deep guilt. Here I am brought face to face with what I have always dreaded was true, and Jesus' love exposes it as the terrible lie it is. This opens up to me so many of the gospel stories that I have understood with my mind but never believed in my heart. I can hear Jesus telling his disciples that the kingdom is like a father who had two sons. In a way that is startlingly new I can see bits of myself in both sons. But most of all I can see the Father coming out to greet me, tears streaming down his face, his arms out to embrace me. I can hear him say to me, "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Lk. 15:24). It happens within my heart. I have been dead. That is the only word I can find for my old guilty life. But now the Father has found me and his love and acceptance has brought me back to life.

To speak of sin is to enter a radically different universe. To discover that I am a sinner is to be overwhelmed by the awareness that I am the beloved of the Father and so called, even opened up, to be a lover, and to see how I cover that over and betray it. This happens to me inside the stories. I experience in a new way how the Lord has always loved me, how he has reached out to heal me and I have subverted that gift. Even now I can see so clearly how I betray this gift of being loved and its invitation to be loving. The woman caught in adultery was healed and sent to share that healing love. So often it stays locked up inside me. This gives me some insight into why the saints confess that they are such great sinners while we, who are not saints, are perplexed by this and find ourselves saying things like, "I may not be great, but I'm not the worst person in the world." Then we wonder what on earth the saints could be talking about. What seems to have happened is that this abiding sense of being cherished by God has sunk deeper and deeper in them. As this happened it gradually displaced the fear and guilt that had distorted them. This is a process of integration and simplification. They gradually came to see themselves as they really were. This deep sense of being loved allowed them to see what they had always avoided seeing: the ingrained refusal to trust God and hand themselves over to him, the games they played with others and themselves.

This sense of being a sinner is the result of God's love working in our hearts. It is his love that opens up our hearts to see what we really are, and that strengthens us to endure the pain of seeing it. Because of this the discovery that I am a sinner is not oppressive, because the care of the Father for me, his sinner, is the dominant reality.⁴ The Father's love crashes through on me to free me from my deep guilt and

teach me true humility. This is a gift of terrible beauty.

Living within these stories discloses a double paradox. The sense of myself as being unacceptable so distorts my being, so fills me with accusation against myself and all reality that I cannot see myself as loved. The result of that is that I can never see myself as a sinner, as one who subverts that gift. Yet it is precisely this haunting sense of being guilty that makes the sinful act where I reject my real destiny as called and sent, something that comes naturally to me. The other side of this is the paradoxical liberation that comes from realizing that I am the Father's sinner.

¹See Sebastian Moore, *The Crucified Jesus Is No Stranger*. N.Y.: Seabury Press, 1977, p. 106.

²This is developed at greater length in Moore's excellent book.

³Moore, p. 109.

⁴This is the experience in the earlier stages of our conversion. As John of the Cross makes clear there are times when very advanced souls have a different experience. Cf. *Dark Night*, II, 5, 5.