

The Innocent & The Guilty

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[0 : 00] About the time of the shooting of Martin Luther King, I was in Toronto and I stood up and preached a sermon and I expressed a whole lot of my feelings in that sermon and the anger that I felt.

And when I was finished, the rector's warden, who was a psychiatrist, said to me, Do you feel better?

Well, I have a sense that I'm going to speak to you in order to help myself feel better this morning. So if it helps you feel better too, that will be good. And if you feel worse, then just pray. We're going on a holiday this week and as the necessity of a holiday comes upon you and your mind begins to twist and distort and you don't like things.

And, you know, if I was just a member of this congregation, I think I'd walk away and never come back because I've been hurt. That's nothing to that. Don't take that very seriously.

[1 : 07] I mean, you get hurt by silly things all the time. What happens here in this congregation, as you may or may not know, is we've had three big congregations since last Sunday in connection with a funeral and then in connection with several weddings that were held yesterday.

And when those weddings come, you see this sort of congregation like a ripe apple on a tree ready to be picked and you'd like to share with them the whole of the gospel of Jesus Christ within the modest structure of what we used to call the solemnization of matrimony and we now call the celebration of marriage.

Well, whether it's solemn or celebratory, I don't know, but there's the congregation and you have to try and speak to them and feel that if only I could give them in a few minutes a glimpse of the glory of God or if they could see something of the reality of the gospel.

Here they are in all their finery with all the joy of the occasion surrounding them and all that is happening that's part of the wedding. And so yesterday I tried particularly with great earnestness to say in a few words what this covenant of marriage is about and what love is about.

And I had the distillation of the wisdom of the ages right on the tip of my tongue to impart to that congregation and a two-year-old flower girl without saying a word took it all away.

[2 : 40] And she took over and nobody heard a word I said. So I went home deeply disappointed. I was defeated by a two-year-old flower girl who could communicate better without opening her mouth than I could after years of trying.

So it's this kind of thing that you develop a kind of love-hate relationship with the community.

I sometimes sense, and I don't know whether this is valid to say this even or not, but I sometimes sense a terrible condescension towards God and a terrible indifference to the person of Jesus Christ and a terrible ignoring of the reality of the working of the Holy Spirit.

And I feel that it's all my responsibility and I have to do something about it and I get very angry and frustrated by it. And the thing that I suspect and that hurts me worst of anything is that that kind of condescension and that kind of indifference and that kind of ignorance is infectious.

And after you've moved in that company for long enough, you begin to have the same kind of condescension and the same kind of indifference and the same kind of ignorance.

[4 : 06] And you think, I've got to escape from this. You know, there's got to be something, and I don't know where to turn. But I have the enormous advantage over most of you, and that is that I have to be here on Sunday morning.

I can't wake up in the morning and debate whether I will or whether I won't. There's just no nothing to debate. I've got to be here. And not only do I have to be here, but for the most part I have to come prepared in a sense.

And time and time again, I just thank God that I have had to do this. And I have had to look at a passage of Scripture and find that a passage of Scripture can take me from the depths of despair and depression, indifference, ignorance, condescension, and give me a whole new awareness of the grace and mercy of God.

And I would like to give you a whole new awareness of the grace and mercy of God as we look at this passage, which was read as the Old Testament lesson. This morning, I'd like God to strip from my life the thing which seems to constantly move in, the pretense and the deceit and the arrogance and the corrosion of jealousy and the cancer of envy and the paralysis of pride.

All those things take hold of me and I find myself a basket case. And I need to know something that can take hold of me in the midst of that, something I can get hold of.

[5 : 57] You know a little bit about a fellow by the name of Bishop Fitzsimmons Allison, who is the Bishop of South Carolina. And I was listening to a tape by him this week and he says it's very hard to start reading the Bible in the New Testament.

He said it's like trying to catch a moving train. You grab hold and you get your arm pulled off, you know, because you can't accelerate fast enough to pick up on the story.

You need to go, as he says, back into the Old Testament and find where the train stops and where you can get on. Peter Spahn told me a lovely story this week about Scott Peck, who was here at a conference last week and described his one childhood encounter with Sunday school when his arm got wrenched off, figuratively at least.

He came to Sunday school. He was handed a picture of Abraham about to slay Isaac on the altar. And Isaac was smiling beatifically at his father.

And Scott Peck's one impression of Sunday school is, these people must be crazy. Well, that kind of experience I think a lot of people have because they try to catch, you know, to take, to catch a moving train.

[7 : 27] And they don't start where it stops and picks them up. And I think the story we have today is a place where the train stops and you can pick it up.

The story which has been developing these past two or three weeks, the story of David and how his armies had gone to war and he chose to stay home.

And he, of an evening, looked out over the parapet from his rooftop to another rooftop where a beautiful woman was bathing. And since he saw no reason to deny his desire, he summoned her and she came and lay with him.

And a child was conceived. And rather than face the consequences of that, David called her husband, who was one of the generals in his army, had him brought back in order that he might be responsible for the impregnation of his wife.

And he came and would refuse to go home to his wife because his fellow soldiers were at war. And the Ark of God was in the battlefield and it was no time for him to be going home.

[8 : 43] And he refused. And so David arranged to have him put at the forefront of the battle in order to be killed. And then the story would not have to come out.

And so Uriah the Hittite was murdered in that way. And the story didn't come out. The child was born. And David carried on as though nothing had happened.

And I dare say in his life nothing was happening. And he carried on until Nathan the prophet came to him.

Now, Nathan the prophet knew David. David was the king. David was the supreme commander of the army.

David was the judge of the highest court in the land. And David, day by day, dispensed justice to the people of the land. So it was not surprising that Nathan would come to him and tell him a story which David listened to in his role as the chief justice.

[9 : 59] And he listened carefully. And he heard of a very rich man who had many flocks. And a stranger came to the rich man.

And it was necessary according to the tradition and custom and according to the word of God that a stranger should be treated with great and loving hospitality whether you knew who he was or not.

And the reason for this was because the Israelites had been strangers in their own time. And they had to look after strangers now. And so it was necessary to provide for the man that a lamb should be killed.

And the rich man, seeing his flocks and not wanting to disturb them, went and took the lamb that belonged to a poor neighbor. The one lamb he owned.

The lamb that was brought up with his children. The lamb that was fed at his table. The lamb that lay in his bosom as he lay down to rest. The lamb that was like a daughter to him.

[11 : 03] And on this story went. And Nathan laid it on. And so David took it in. And his indignation mounted as he heard every syllable of this story come out.

And he, the chief justice, was filled with the wrath and indignation which belonged to his office. And as he listened to the story, as it came out, he decided in high indignation.

He listened. And then he broke in and he said, As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die to restore the lamb fourfold because he had no pity.

And Nathan said to him, You are the man. Well, I think that's the way it's meant to work.

If you were to read how Nathan followed up on that, he said, he explained it to David, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, I anointed you king over Israel.

[12 : 13] I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. I gave you your master's house, your master's wives into your bosom. I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah.

And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord to do what is evil in his sight?

You have smitten Uriah the Hittite with the sword and taken his wife to be your wife. And so Nathan told David what the true situation was.

He told him not only what the true situation was, he told him what the consequences of that situation would be. And he said to him, these things.

Because he went on and took the occasion to tell David what would be the consequence of his sin.

[13 : 26] And he enumerated it in this way. He said, the sword shall never depart from your house because you have despised me.

I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor. And he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this son.

For you did it secretly. But I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun. So what was hidden will be manifest. Well, Nathan didn't spare him the telling of him the consequences of what he would do, of what he had done.

Not only was his sin revealed in the story, but the consequences of it were revealed to him in the prophecy which Nathan made to him. And he makes David realize that the sin is against God.

It's not, you see, we don't mind sinning against one another because when you sin against one another, you sin against a sinner. And you can always justify yourself for sinning against a sinner because, well, they deserved it.

[14 : 47] And we justify ourselves all the time on that basis. The man who steals steals because the man he's stealing from has stolen what he has in his opinion.

And that's the process that goes on. But Nathan made David realize that he had sinned against God. You despised the word of the Lord.

He says in chapter 12, verse 9, and then he says in chapter 12, verse 10, you despised me. And then further on, he says, you have utterly scorned the Lord.

You have left him entirely out of your thinking. He's not been a part of what you've done. You have despised despised and utterly scorned the Lord.

He tells them that all these things have happened. And David becomes aware of it. Becomes aware of the fact of what he's done.

[15 : 53] And when you turn to the passage again and see what David does, he says, I have sinned against the Lord.

He recognizes what has happened. And you see, I just treasure that moment. The grace of God in bringing David through Nathan to that moment.

I treasure that moment in my own life. I treasure that moment for each one of you. I treasure the moment when by the grace of God you are brought to the place where you recognize who you are. And you recognize the consequence of the way you live your life. And I recognize the consequence of the way I live my life. And all the bitterness and all the anger and all the hostility I feel to the people out there and to the people over there and to the people in that part of the world, all that is secondary to the primary reality that I know that I have sinned.

And that where it needs to start if there is to be any change it's with me. And I think I can accept the fact that the consequences of what I have done will not change.

[17 : 18] The consequences will go on. It was interesting to hear in connection with the problem of the ozone layer. That even if the whole world decided today to change and not to create that problem any longer the consequences of what we have done will go on for another 50 years.

And so the way we've lived our life the consequences go on. But there is also in our hearts and in our lives a new beginning.

and that new beginning is the place which God alone can bring us to. We'll never come there by ourselves. Consequences that now will take 50 years to work themselves out will in 10 years take 70 years to work themselves out.

And on and on it will go. And unless there is some place of new beginning for us then despair and hopelessness belong to us. but there is a place of new beginning.

And it's funny that in this story you see there is there is a strange word. I mean the story is offensive.

[18 : 34] I can't I can't think anybody could read it without being offended in their sensibilities. but the story ends with the child that is born to you shall die.

That's one of the consequences. The innocent child shall die for the guilty adult. And at the basis of our dealings with God the innocent one dies while the guilty one is pardoned.

And that you see becomes the basis of how how the change takes place. How the new beginning begins. The innocent one dies and the guilty one is pardoned.

And that just runs right through the warp and woof of the whole of the presentation of the gospel in the whole of scripture. That that takes place.

And on the basis of that God is able to pardon because the price is paid. You may be offended by that and I expect that you are and in fact I guess I hope you are.

[19 : 43] Because until you see how that is provided for in the gospel through the death of the innocent one in order that the guilty one may be pardoned then you won't understand the extent and riches and the nature of the gospel.

Jesus was in that sense he was a he was a Nathan to us. That's his function going around being a Nathan telling stories to us.

That's why it's very important for you if I might say so very humbly to belong to a Bible study group. A small group where you are continually exposed to the ministry of Nathan in the person of Jesus Christ who tells you the story which at first arouses your indignation until that gracious work of the Holy Spirit says the person you are judging and condemning is yourself.

And that has taken place. and you can you can understand how this works I think if I tell you that what Jesus did was to go around and tell stories and the result of his stories was that people the result of his story was that people recognized who they were and recognized that they had sinned and were very much in need of God's forgiveness.

The rich fool came to Jesus and Jesus said to him this night your soul shall be required of you. And that story how many hearts has it gripped as John Chapman preached it to us in April and told us about the rich fool or the rich young ruler who didn't know his own heart until Jesus said to him go and sell all that you have and give to the poor and come and follow me.

[21 : 56] And suddenly the rich young ruler knew who he was and the senior ecclesiastical dignitary Nicodemus who came to Jesus and Jesus said to him you must be born again or the woman of Samaria who came to Jesus thinking she knew who he was but he didn't know who she was and quite the reverse turned out to be the story when Jesus turned to her and said go and call your husband and she said I have no husband when Jesus had explained that to her she went back to her community and the whole community came out because that woman had said to them this man told me all I ever did he knows who I am and you could go from there to Pilate and Pilate said to Jesus I have the power to crucify you and I have the power to let you go and Jesus said you don't know who you are you have no power over me at all and he told him when you hear the story of the crowd crying crucify him to Pilate in response to Pilate's question you recognize that that's who you are that you're one of the people who've cried that Christ might be crucified and that process goes on as Jesus reveals to us who we really are and that becomes that becomes the basis of how God deals with us that he begins by recognizing who we are and we recognize who he is do you remember the Gadarene demoniac he came running down to Jesus when Jesus arrived on the shore and he said

I know who you are what Jesus didn't say in so many words but proved unmistakably that it wasn't he who knew who Jesus was it was Jesus who knew who he was when he commanded the legion of demons to be sent out of him the man was dressed and clothed and in his right mind when the story ends he had discovered who he really was after his encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and that is the place of renewal and that is the point of renewal and that is that's the place that we all need to come to in order that we will recognize who we are and I tell you this because I think we have to come back again and again to this place we have to come back to recognizing that we have sinned we have to come back to recognizing the consequences of our sin we have to come back to recognizing that the innocent one suffers for the guilty one that that transaction is somehow at the heart of the gospel with the death of Christ on the cross we have to come back as well to that to that place where our life is hid with God in Christ nobody else may indeed know about it but we know the reality of God's forgiveness and that that's the source of our health and strength and that's the source of our salvation and that's the source of our continuing renewal in the faith to which God has called us in Christ and enables us by his Holy Spirit and that's what the ministry is all about I mean that's what that's what your ministry is to one another that you would share that reality with one another that we might be so open-hearted to one another that we might share that reality and find in it the miracle of the grace of God and the forgiveness of God Amen