

“WOE IS US!”

What does this list of public figures have in common: Mark Warner, John Edwards, Jesse Jackson, Bill Clinton, Bob Livingston, Gary Hart, Newt Gingrich, Jimmy Swaggert, Jim Baker, and if you go back far enough, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin? They all got caught with their proverbial pants down. Henry Kissinger is quoted as saying, “Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac.” This list is a reminder that sin is an equal opportunity employer. Sin crosses the boundaries of liberal/conservative, republican/democrat. Sin is a powerful and destructive force in our lives.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said that the Christian doctrine of sin was about the only self-evident doctrine we have. Every one of us has been at the receiving and giving end of sin. Sin is the thing that we do and the thing we ought to do and don't. It is personal and communal. Sin is what separates us from God. Sin is what separates us from our very best selves. Lent is the season when we focus on sin, though our texts today speak of sin in Epiphany. To be given a vision of the living, righteous God is to see how we have fallen short, messed up, and rebelled in our lives under God. Epiphany leads to honesty. Both of our texts, as you will see, speak with an amazingly similar voice.

In our first text, young Isaiah is in the temple at worship. He has a stunning vision. It was as if the heavens opened and he was the very throne of God. “Holy, holy, holy,” sang the cherubim. *“The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And Isaiah said, ‘Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!’”* In the presence of the Holy, Isaiah sees himself as he really is. His first reaction is not amazement, but honest self-appraisal. *“I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.”* That of course, is why God chose Isaiah: to speak to the people, to call them back from the sin which has driven a wedge between themselves and their God. *“Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’”* Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, *‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’* And I said, *‘Here I am send me!’”*

In Luke we have the familiar situation of the crowds pressing in on Jesus. He got into a boat and continued to teach the people gathered. The fishermen had been out all night and had not caught anything. This reminded me of a story I heard about two kids ice fishing nearby last week; they have been out there for hours and not caught anything. They look and see an older man on another part of the lake and he has stringers full of fish. They go and ask him his secret. He mumbles a response which they cannot understand, so they ask him again. This time he spits in his hands and says, “Keep your worms warm.” Talk about a man with unclean lips. I know that has nothing to do with this passage from Luke, but isn't it a great joke. We need one good laugh in the midst of a heavy sermon on sin.

Back to Luke. The fisherman had been out all night and hadn't caught anything. Jesus, in a boat teaching the crowds on the shore, tells Peter to put in his net. He replies, *“Master we have worked all night and caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”* This time when they pull up the nets, they have so many fish that the weight of the catch threatens to sink the boat. Simon Peter falls on his knees, and reminiscent of Isaiah says, *“Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man.”* Peter knows he has witnessed something extraordinary---a glimpse into the power of God. Jesus says to him, *“Do not be afraid. For I will make you fishers of men and women.”* In both of these stories we see people who find themselves face to face with the awesome righteousness of God. We are witnesses to the great gap between whom we are and who God is.

A young seminary student briefly served as a chaplain in a state prison. He received a request from a father of a young man who committed a robbery in a little town and had been sentenced for many years in jail. The young man was angry and terribly bitter. The boy's father came each week to visit him, but the boy refused to see him. The young chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the young man to see his father, but he wouldn't budge. Despite his refusal, the boy's father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled

across the state in the hope of seeing his son. Every week it became the difficult task of the chaplain to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad today?" Then he had to bear the burden of refusal and the waiting father. The father would thank the chaplain, gather up his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip back home.

One day, after telling the father that once again, his son would not meet with him, the chaplain said, "Why do you keep coming back week after week? No one would do what you are doing. Your son is an embittered defiant young man. Give up. Go back home and get on with your life. I don't know anyone who would put up with this kind of rejection week after week. Nobody would do this." "*God has put up with this for centuries,*" said the father, as he picked up his meager belongings and headed out. The young chaplain literally fell to his knees at this vision of the righteousness of God. Woe is me! I am a sinful man whose lips and life are not worthy of the greatness of God.

I had a woman in my last church who would consistently protest the prayer of confession in the Sunday morning worship service. She would say, "I just will not be a party to this negative experience week after week. I don't want to be reminded of my faults and weaknesses. I want positive reinforcement." I would argue that there is a time for positive reinforcement, and there is a time to be honest about how far short we have fallen from what we could be. Every one of us is a walking civil war, capable of beautiful acts of self-less love, and equally capable of hurtful, selfish behavior. Christians sense sin as the huge gap between us and our loving, forgiving, seeking Savior. Christians confess only because of a prior confidence in a forgiving, gracious God. Peter cried, "Depart from me, I am a sinful man!" The good news of course, is that he never does. Jesus sticks with Peter through denial and abandonment.

Without critical self-reflection, without honest appraisal of who we are, there is the danger that righteous behavior becomes self-righteous behavior. I cannot think of any human characteristic which is uglier than self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is not an exclusively Christian characteristic. I remember the most vociferous critic of President Clinton's sexual escapades, Rep. Dan Burton of Indiana, my former congressman. As he was wagging his finger, his self-righteous finger at Bill Clinton, he knew of his own marital infidelity and the child which resulted from it. Sin is the great equalizer.

Morton Kelsey in his wonderful book *Caring* highlights the very strange encounter between Jesus and his disciples just before the last supper. Jesus gets down on his knees with water and a towel to wash Peter's feet. You all know the story. Peter protests, but Jesus insists. Remember that sewage was just thrown into the streets, and wearing sandals, walking through dirty, dusty streets would have made someone else's feet pretty disgusting. This very strange act is a powerful symbol of our faith. Kelsey writes, "The church is meant to be a fellowship of those who know the filth of their own feet and are willing to wash the feet of others and allow their own feet to be washed by others. As I have said elsewhere, the church is not a museum for saints, but a hospital for sinners. When the church is really the church, it is a place where we can go in our discouragement about ourselves and find other unjudging people who have found some answers, methods and ways of doing better." (p. 53)

Douglas Walrath in his book *Options* writes, "Godly people are startling and engaging. In contemporary, post-Christian society, especially within the activities of everyday life, most of us are surprised to encounter people who are obviously godly. To interact with people who clearly identify themselves as Christian and church members, and who do not try to condemn us, or convert us, or recruit us, or otherwise manipulate us, who simply live out their faith because that is who they are, is equally surprising. Such people are not typical. They startle us." (pp. 34-35) I think people like that also inspire us to be the very best selves we can be. Maybe that is part of the mysterious experience of Peter in the presence of Jesus. Epiphany. Suddenly seeing into the fabric of love, woven into the human heart. Jesus throughout his entire short life walked the talk. People who were not threatening by his emancipating message were startled, and often healed.

Jesus called the disciples to be fishers of people. They respond to his invitation, and under his guidance they learn to repattern their lives and live by faith. They discover in a new way how God is present within their daily experiences. At the end of their training they are able to live by faith within ordinary life. And the quality of their faithful living challenges others to believe as well. This is exactly the challenge laid out before us. We sin. We are far from perfect. I don't think God wants or expects perfection. Scripture is filled with terribly

flawed, but faith-filled people. People, who think they are or can be perfect, are dangerous. Strive for perfection, if you must, but if think you have arrived, take a good look in the mirror.