

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
Pentecost 4C, June 12, 2016
A repeat of my sermon from June 14, 1998
(Reworked a bit)

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Nathan said to David] Thou art the man! (2 Samuel 12:7,
KJV)

When sin is afoot – especially grave sin -- these are four of the most dreadful words in the Bible:

Thou art the man!
Thou art the woman!

They are words of revelation and truth. They answer the question: *Who* is guilty of sin? Who is the guilty one?

Suppose this searching question were let loose on earth and addressed to *everyone*. Suppose this question were to reverberate in the world, and come swooping down from the heavens, filling all the canyons of the wild west and all the wild cities of our land, echoing and resounding so that every corner of every mind and heart were filled with this one question: Who is the guilty one? It is precisely the question framed by Good Friday, in that haunting hymn, “Ah, Holy Jesus”:

Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.
'Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee;
I crucified thee. (LBW 123, verse 2)

Who among us could escape some shame? Who among us would not have to admit that we have sinned and strayed and wandered away too much from Jesus and from his ways?

The prophet Nathan faces a king — an honored, powerful king. But Nathan pulls no punches. To the question, “Who is the guilty one?” Nathan declares the answer for which David must be responsible: Thou art the man! Thou, David! Do not glance elsewhere! Do not instinctively try to lay the blame on someone else and try to deflect the judgment from yourself. Be still and take this in: Thou art the man! Thou are the sinner! You are the one who has ruined the world of Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. You are the one who has wrecked havoc on earth! You are the one who commanded that Bathsheba should be brought to you. You are the

one who slept with her. You are the one who disrupted her family, caused the death of her husband, Uriah, through your cowardly commands, and in the process you broke the heart of that loyal soldier's mother and father, sister and brother, fellow soldiers and every citizen who yearns for justice in the land.

So it is that David stands condemned. And now we come to an awful part – the part concerning the baby. For the words of Nathan include words of judgment on the King: Thou, David, thou art the one who is going to see with crystal clarity the meaning of your sin, for you are going to see the death of your newborn child. The child is safe with the LORD. The child will wear a golden crown over heavenly kingdoms -- yea, will wear that crown with much greater dignity than you do, you who wears the crown of Israel. So, fear not for the child! But you! You shall see the death and the havoc that was the *inner meaning* of your murder of Uriah and your sleeping with his wife. For thou art the man! King David: *You* are the one who is guilty. *You* are the one who deserves judgment.

Nathan had guided King David to this dreadful moment by way of his story of the poor man and his lamb. But when the King rightly denounced the rich man in the story -- the man who had appropriated and killed the lamb -- that is, when David condemned this abuse of power, he thereby stood self-condemned, for he had done the same thing, only much worse. The sin against which David raged is a sin in which David himself participated. In this way the judgment of King David rebounded upon himself, and he had to hear the awful pronouncement: Thou art the man.

Perhaps we should learn a lesson here: Perhaps we should learn that righteous indignation should always be expressed with humility, for *we too* are guilty of sin. With the judgment with which we condemn others, we are deserving of being condemned ourselves.

This theme of humility is repeated in today's Gospel story about the Pharisee and the notorious woman of the city.

Now [the Pharisee]... said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39, RSV)

Outwardly, this Pharisee was polite toward the woman. He held his tongue. He might have felt that his home had been invaded by this woman, since it is hard to imagine that he invited her in. She simply enters the house, as if she must. She comes striding into the house, in confidence, not in him, the house owner, but in Jesus, the guest. And she rather makes a scene, a remarkable scene of washing the feet of Jesus with her tears and anointing his feet.

Again, this Pharisee holds his tongue. He is outwardly polite. But in his heart, he murmurs about the matter. He concludes that this whole event disqualifies Jesus as a prophet of Israel, since he seems not to know that the woman is a notorious sinner. In this way, he makes two interior condemnations. He condemns the

woman and he condemns Jesus, his guest.

Sometimes, when we sin, our sins are not so quickly found out. But this man's sins were immediately found out, for Jesus, who reads the thoughts and intentions of the human heart, could see and perfectly well understand what the man was thinking to himself. Jesus could hear the murmuring of the man's heart as if it were clear speech. And then Jesus answers the man. It is an answer that draws the man up short, for it reveals him to be deficient in love -- a deficiency which cannot be made up for by all the rectitude in the world.

With this story we learn something about the Eighth Commandment, the commandment against false witness. What we learn is that our Lord Jesus does not want us to be that way, internally gossiping and condemning others. Just as we are not to commit murder or adultery in our hearts, so we should refrain from gossip, even in our hearts. You might recall Luther's beautiful interpretation of the Eighth Commandment — the way that commandment asks us to seek “charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbors.” Such charitable interpretations are not meant to dismiss the truth, but to permit us to see the truth that we otherwise might not see... to permit us to see the good that otherwise we might miss. In this case, the Pharisee was failing to see that it is a good and holy thing on earth when a person comes to repentance. This woman he condemns was indeed guilty of many sins, yet he fails to see that her repentance with many tears is one of the best sights in the world. Of course, the Grand Canyon is beautiful. Of course the Mona Lisa is beautiful. But also the sinner who commences the penitential life is beautiful. It is as Jesus says:

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. (Luke 15:7, RSV)

Through his internal murmuring, the Pharisee was failing to perceive a sight over which the angels in heaven were rejoicing. And through his internal murmuring, the Pharisee was failing to perceive his own sin and need for repentance.

As it turns out, there is only one person on the face of this earth who can safely condemn anyone, and that is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. He is the only one who can safely murmur about others and condemn them, without in the process exposing himself to the charge of hypocrisy. For he is innocent. Everyone one else has some deficiency of love or deficiency of virtue to be revealed. But he has none.

And yet, what does Jesus say to the sinner? What does the only One in heaven and earth who has the moral right to condemn us say to us? He is glad to say to us what he said to the frightened woman caught in adultery, who would have been stoned to death except for his intervention:

Is there no one to condemn you? Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more. (John 8:11, KJV)

Jesus repeats these words to us even this morning, for our encouragement. When we walk out into the city today and into the Puerto Rican Day parade and into the hurly-burly of everyday life, we will go with his blessing of peace: “Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” And that is what we should do, repeating such peaceful words to a frustrating world, to the benefit of our neighbor and to the glory of the Lord.

There has got to be another way forward in this world besides that bitter self-righteousness that threatens to rebound on us and thereby leave us self-condemned. It would be good for us, I believe, to remove the bitter eye from our neighbors and to follow the spirit of the apostle who summed up his life with the words:

For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.(1 Cor 2:2, RSV)

My proposal, then, is that we take our lead from today’s reading from Galatians 2. Let us train ourselves to *look less* at either our erring neighbor and to look *more* upon Jesus. Let us take to heart that magnificent verse in today’s Epistle reading, the one where St. Paul releases all merit and all bitterness in order simply to rest in the Lord. Hear his testimony again:

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...(Galatians 2)

Oh, that we could live with even more earnestness by this apostolic saying

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...”

This will mean humility for us, charitable interpretations of the deeds of our neighbor, and love for one another. Altogether, it will mean a manner of life that imitates Jesus and manifests him to our world. And this will surely be for the good and for the truth and for the glory of God, Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.