

WOE BE GONE

Is. 6:1-8; Rom. 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

Garrison Keillor, the radio personality, story teller, and terrible singer, has written a number of novels and short stories, most of which are related to the fictitious town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. His stories and writings are almost all set against the backdrop of Norwegian Lutheranism as it is practiced in Minnesota. In the novel *Wobegon Boy*, he writes, “All the Norwegians were Lutherans, of course, even the atheists—it was a Lutheran God they did not believe in—but a chasm separated the ... Dark Lutherans, who believed in the utter depravity of man and separation from worldly things and strict adherence to the literal truth of Scripture, and the... Happy Lutherans, who believed in splashing some water on babies and confirming the little kids and then not worrying about it, just come every Sunday and bring a hot dish.

“The two factions were divided over the role of women and the color of the sky and how to make coleslaw, and they divided over the issue of ‘Will we recognize each other in heaven, or will our spiritual forms not have our earthly features?’ A Dark Lutheran would say, ‘My sainted grandmother is waiting for me beyond the pearly gates, free from suffering and care, and if you’re saying I won’t know her, you are ignorant of Scripture, you infidel , and to hell with you; and a Happy Lutheran might reply, ‘It’s not important to me one way or another, but if you think your face is something God would allow in a place of perfect bliss maybe you ought to take another look.’

“The Dark Lutherans were strict about dress, which should be modest—no trousers for girls, not even infant girls—and about the Sabbath: after church, you remained in a devotional mode for the rest of the day sitting in a room with shades pulled, perusing a commentary on Habbakuk or Obadiah. The Happy Lutherans said, “Oh, what harm would it do to read *David Copperfield* on Sunday, or play baseball, or hear a Mozart sonata?’ and the Dark Lutherans cried, ‘Do you care so little for Him who shed His life’s blood for you that you cannot spare one day out of seven to think of Him and of Him only? Is this too much to ask?’” (pp. 136f.)

One of the things that distinguishes the Dark from the Happy Lutherans, as Keillor tells it, is guilt. The Dark Lutherans see guilt as central to who we are; the Happy Lutherans not so much. Dark Lutherans and Happy Lutherans are, of course, caricatures of Christian piety and Lutheran Piety in particular, but guilt is real and it deserves more than caricature. Guilt is something most of us struggle with, to a greater or lesser degree. We are not so sunk in it as Dark Lutherans, but neither perhaps are we riding as high in the water as Happy Lutherans.

First and foremost, let’s agree that guilt is a good thing. Guilt is to morality what sensitivity to heat is to your fingertips. If you could not feel heat you might put your hand on the burner of a stove and burn yourself badly. That you can feel the heat causes you to draw your hand back and save yourself from burning it. So, too, with guilt, which tells us that we are about to commit some sort of moral offense and that we need to think twice and stop ourselves from doing what we ought not to do. Or, if we have already done something that is morally offensive, that we need to seek forgiveness or make restitution. We can be guilty before the law, but we can also be morally guilty for

something we've done that does not constitute an offense against the law. It is important that *feelings* of guilt be appropriate to the situation that has occasioned the guilt. People are morbidly guilty when their sense of guilt is out of all proportion to the facts of the case. Similarly, people can be remorseless and feel no guilt for offenses they have committed which might be quite serious. Neither of these would seem to be a fitting response of a moral creature. A fitting response is to feel appropriately guilty, guilt in proportion to the circumstances that occasion the feeling.

In the early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet has a religious vision and believes himself to be in the presence of God. He is awestruck and terrified and says, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..." This sense of religious unworthiness is not the same thing as guilt over something that one has done. Indeed, this is more like shame, which is not the same thing as guilt but is rather the sense that one is worthless to the core and irredeemable. In the story, Isaiah is paralyzed by his unworthiness before God and unable to imagine himself as a prophet of God. In the story, this sense of unworthiness is magically purged away by a scary angel of God, who then says, "...your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." More precisely, it is shame rather than guilt that has departed, and the effect of this is that Isaiah now feels worthy enough to accept responsibility for his life and put his life in the service of God: "Here I am; send me!" he says. This is a primitive story, but we can see in it a developing understanding of God as One who frees us from our shame so that we can live our lives responsibly in the world. In the Gospel of John we read, "...God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Thus we see the error of the Dark Lutherans,

whose view is that the world is hopeless and that we are hopeless creatures, condemned for our sinfulness, miserable wretches with no good in us.

That our shame has been banished does not mean, however, that we are without moral responsibility and that we are not guilty when we fail to accept our moral responsibility. We are not Happy Lutherans if this means thinking the love of God absolves us from our responsibility to exert moral effort in the world for the sake of justice and compassion. We have responsibility with respect to other individuals and with respect to society at large. Freed *from* shame, we are free to act, to take responsibility for the mission we have in Christ to make a world where love is more possible.

One of the measures of good religion is whether or not it makes us *appropriately* responsible. How responsible is this? Responsible enough to love our neighbors as ourselves, responsible enough to take the freedom we have as children of God and make something good of it, responsible enough to recognize that we learn from our errors how to be more complete and better people.

At the start of our worship service we make public confession of our sin. In the course of this confession, we take a few seconds to examine our consciences and consider where we have gone wrong during the past week. Not enough time. Barely enough to center ourselves *in preparation for* the examination of conscience. Never mind. This is only a ritual, a means of reminding ourselves that the God we worship banishes the dimension of sin that is shame and calls us beyond the dimension of our sin that is guilt. Thereby we stand before God and take responsibility for our part in the relationship with God, accepting our responsibility, our moral responsibility, for being Christ to our

neighbors. That the confession goes by in a flash should not suggest that coming to terms with our responsibility for what we have done and what we do is a trivial matter to be dispensed with quickly. In many ways, the rest of the service is for the purpose of helping us come to terms and move forward, as, of course, are our private meditations and prayer regarding how we live in the world. But the public confession comes and goes quickly, as if to say to us: “Banish all dismay, and be not ashamed! You are a child of God. Take responsibility as love demands for what you have done and what you have left undone, and do your best to be the child of God’s love that you are. This is a new day, and you are God’s good creation!” Amen.

The Holy Trinity, June 7, 2009

Emanuel Lutheran Church