

Genesis 2:15 -17, 3:1-7 3/13/11

Part of Seminary education for people who want to be Lutheran Pastors is something called "Clinical Pastoral Education"...CPE. It was put in the curriculum to help give students a "hands on" experience in giving pastoral care.

When I was in Seminary, back when Martin Luther was on the faculty, Clinical Pastoral Education was ten-weeks long... cut into the summer between our first and second year. The settings for CPE included prisons, hospitals, Psychiatric Institutions, long-term care facilities. We were expected to live on site the entire 10 weeks. We would be assigned to a particular "unit", where we would function as "chaplains" for the summer.

I went to a large mental hospital about half way out on Long Island, New York. The place sprawled over hundreds of acres and included dozens of nondescript high-rise buildings: most had bars on the windows. There was an unpleasant, institutional feel to everything: cold and sterile. It was not a happy place.

I was to be the chaplain in the "admissions unit" for "Female Alcoholics". It was a "Locked Ward", you needed a key to get in or out. Women who had an addiction to alcohol were confined there for up to 28 days, many of them, against their will. Most were there, I was told, just to "dry out".

The hope was that some might get to the point that they would voluntarily admit themselves into a real treatment program, and begin a process of recovery, but few did. Most had been to the unit multiple times.

I was 23 years old. I knew absolutely nothing about alcoholism or addiction. Outside of one Seminary course in "pastoral care and counseling", I had no real resources to do anything helpful for the people I was supposed to chaplain...

But this was "Clinical" training. So there was supervision. A qualified pastoral counselor met individually with every member of the program at least once a week for intense conversation and careful oversight of what we were doing with the people in the units.

And every day we had two hours of "group". Eight of us in the program, would gather with the supervisor so that we could talk about what we were doing in pastoral care. We would write up incidents and pastoral conversations we had with people, and share what we did and said with the group. We would then critique each other's performance.

Lord have mercy.

And, since CPE was meant to be a rather intense and eye-opening experience for young pastors in training, we were expected to talk about deeply personal issues that

would come up for us. What was going on in our life and relationships? In our faith? In our sense of “vocation”? After all, how could we help others if we didn’t know ourselves?

The group leader would agitate us regularly if we didn’t “share” enough in these sessions. Were we silent, agreeable and pleasant? Then what were we hiding? Didn’t we trust the group? And how could others in the group get to know themselves if we didn’t share the shallow and unpleasant things we had noticed about them?

I had never met even one other person in my group. Not one other person from my seminary was part of this particular CPE program. I was raised in a family with a German background... We didn’t talk about personal stuff with each other, let alone with absolute strangers... We just wanted to be liked... well, at least I did...

Fortunately there were a couple people in my group who had major issues that they were quite willing to talk about anytime. So we could always focus on their problems... out of concern for *them*, of course! I was able to get through group pretty much unscathed for about eight weeks.

Something rather unexpected happened to me that summer, apart from all this other stuff. I began to develop a good friendship with one of the other guys in the group. Early on, he let me know that he was gay, well, homosexual we called it 40 years ago... I had never talked to anybody about this, especially about my own then deeply hidden feelings... But I did talk about this with him. It was very scary but also wonderful to start to get some of this out in the open... As a result, I think, for the first time ever, I actually began to feel what it’s like to fall in love with someone. So, if nothing else my “questions” about my own sexual identity began to be answered that summer.

One night, about nine weeks into CPE, the two of us went to a Diner for a meal... We were talking about the program, and how the group was going... By then I was feeling pretty good about things. Others hadn’t fared as well as I did. I had only been ripped to shreds once because of the really stupid way I had handled things with one of the residents on my unit. I thought that I had learned some “valuable lessons” from all this, so I would be able to go back to Seminary and talk about how “rewarding” the summer had been... I was feeling pretty good about myself

At some point in the conversation, my friend began to talk to me about what he had come to know about me over the summer, completely aside from learning about my sexual identity, which was no big deal to him. To my horror, what he came to know about me was not what I wanted him or anybody else to know. Without me even being aware of it, this person had seen virtually all of my personal shortcomings. He identified out loud most my bad behaviors and worse, the often petty feelings that were usually behind them. He exposed the things I worked hard to keep secret. Fear, weakness, cruelty, pettiness, selfishness. And a lot more. And he accurately identified specific instances of each of these in actions he saw in me over the summer. I was absolutely stunned.

Of course I did what any self-respecting person would do... I denied everything... I got angry and indignant... “How could you accuse me of having such bad motives? I thought you were my friend”, etc...

But he was relentless... I couldn't break away. He had me pegged, and we both knew it. I was exactly the person he described, even though I wasn't ready to admit that out loud. He had seen beneath the veneer in a way no one ever had, or at least no one had ever told me... He had pointed out so many faults I thought I had hidden well: flaws I truly believed made me unacceptable and unlovable. Yes, it was that bad.

According to Genesis, at least the part of the story we read today, after the man and woman had disobeyed God and eaten from the forbidden tree, their “eyes were opened”, and “they knew that they were naked.”

When I hear this story, I don't think about how I look when I step out of the shower. I think about how I felt one summer night at a Diner on Long Island. I don't think this story is meant to explain why people need to wear clothing. I do think it's a **profound** illustration of a very real and paralyzing human fear: a fear of being seen for who we really are.

One theologian writing recently in the Magazine “Christian Century” commented on how the Man and Woman in the Garden try to hide their nakedness from God. The author writes about how absurd it is for the humans to think that God won't notice something has changed with the sudden introduction of loincloths into Paradise. Didn't God know they were naked before? Will nakedness offend God now?

Unfortunately, our lesson today ends with nakedness: with the humans waist high in the brush. We know, however, that there is more to the story. What follows immediately is God walking through Eden, “in the pleasant cool of the evening”, we're told. The fig-leaf clad humans have gone the extra mile to hide themselves extremely well. Finally, God speaks: “Where are you?”, God says. “Where are you?”

Please don't misunderstand this question, or its intent... It's not that God is seeking the man and woman to punish them. No. What God is looking for is companionship... God is looking for the man and woman in order to walk with them in the garden.. to walk together as they always had before. It's why God made them and delighted in their creation: God made them to be God's companions. “Where are you?”, God says... “where are you?”

Taking all of this in, the writer in Christian Century says: “Why on earth, when we have the perpetual invitation to walk with God, why on earth do we humans instead skulk in the trees.?”

Why indeed.

And why when so many people are lonely, overlooked, or pushed aside... when so many people hunger for human companionship... why do we still “skulk in the trees” with each other?

Back to the Diner on Long Island on that summer evening. No matter how many “fig leaves” of respectability I tried to sew together I completely failed to cover myself. Someone I cared for had seen right through me. He saw me with devastating accuracy. My eyes were open. I knew that I was naked in a way I had never been naked before. And it was pure awful.

An amazing thing happened then. I was finally reduced to silence... somewhat rare, I know... My friend took that moment to reach across the table, take my hand, and say, “You know, I love you anyway”.

I can’t adequately do justice to the power of that simple action and those few words... It was a beginning for me of appreciating what love actually is... whether that love is given in friendship, romance, charity or compassion. This incident has lived with me and helped me believe that we can be loved for who we are: loved, even if we seem unlovable to ourselves. That God does this with us all the time... sees us naked... loves us anyway

“Where are you?” God says... not because God wants to sting us with accusations, but because God wants to find us no matter where we might try to hide, or why we think we have to.

“Where are you”, God calls, simply because God wants to walk with us... to walk with us care-free, hand in hand, in love and joy, naked in every sense of that word. God invites us to walk in the kind of relationship God established with us in the beginning: a relationship God willingly restores for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the savior.

All the energy we put into fig-leaf weaving... whether that’s with God or other people... it doesn’t really get us anywhere. God calls us out of the shadows, and away from “skulking in the trees”... God invites us to those places, yes scary places at times... God invites us to places where we can experience real love... And God invites us to live as if we know what love actually is.

Trust me, that sure beats fumbling with fig leaves.

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