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Luther Memorial Church

2 Samuel 11.26—12.10; 12.13-15; Psalm 32

Galatians 2.15-21; St. Luke 7.36—8.3

“The LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore David, and it became very ill.”

“ I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

“Then Jesus said to the woman, ‘Your sins are forgiven.’... “And he said to the woman, ‘Your faith has saved you; go in peace.’”

Third Sunday after Pentecost June 13, 2010

On a day when we celebrate the baptism of a child—Cooper Owen Ferguson—it is hard to hear that, “The Lord struck the child... and it became very ill.” Were we to read on, we would learn that, in spite of David’s repentance, the child eventually died. And so, rather than move beyond Elijah’s prosecution of God last Sunday (“O Lord my God have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?”), today’s reading goes a step further, by baldly declaring that “The Lord struck the child...and it became very ill.”

It would have been hard enough, I suppose, had God struck David directly for this adulterous theft of Uriah’s wife, and the murder of her husband. It might have been just for David to receive the judgment of his own mouth: “The man who did this deserves to die.” Though fearsome in severity, David’s death would have made some cruel sense: an eye for an eye, *quid pro quo*, and so forth.

As it stands, however, God’s attack upon the child born of David’s adultery, seems not only cruel but badly wrong. How can it be right to kill a child—even a child born of an adulterous relationship? The Levitical law does not require this, but rather the death of the adulterers and generally by stoning: the community thus rids itself of the offending parties by bludgeoning them to death with rocks. One can imagine that such an action might have gone some distance toward eliminating sexual misbehavior. Yet, it didn’t—whether in David’s case or countless others.

But the death of a child? Of course, we might recall all sorts of shabby philosophical arguments in defense of the Almighty (The child would have been better off dead than alive as a bastard It is simply God’s will and, while we do not understand God’s mysterious will, we accept it because like Television says, *Father Knows Best*. And, finally [as Luther himself reasoned when his daughter Magdalena died], the dead child is better off in heaven with the angels, than suffering alive on

earth.) But none of these or any other rationale goes very far in offering satisfactory reasons for killing *any* child, let alone one conceived as a result of the parents' sin.

Of course, anthropologists who study religious culture might suggest that ancient peoples did not or could not distinguish between punishing a parent and punishing a child—or perhaps that killing a child was a harder punishment than killing the perpetrator of the sin itself. Perhaps. But Marcion, an ancient religious interpreter, rejected passages such as this. So antiquity alone seems insufficient reason to suppose that ancient people found an infanticidal God any less offensive than we do. Like Marcion, most of us would probably reject the God who put the child of David and Uriah's wife (or any child) to death. But maybe that's at least part of the point: in an age when millions of children (born and unborn) are routinely condemned to death without much of a thought, texts such as this reveal our eagerness to condemn God and let ourselves off the proverbial hook while we continue to defend free-markets, and wars, and abortions that casually take the lives of countless children in the name of abstractions like freedom, justice, and individual rights.

Today's readings have little to do with abstractions, however, and much to do with the human condition, and especially the religious impulse to condemn God or those we find repugnant to our own code of propriety. For St. Paul, writing to the Galatians, "justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ" is more than a concept derived through a combination of abstractions like righteousness, grace, and faith. For Paul, such concepts and notions have their ultimate meaning in relation to the living person of Christ—the crucified and risen Lord enfleshed in the God—Man Jesus of Nazareth.

Today's Gospel tells of Jesus eating in the home of a religiously righteous man, a Pharisee named Simon, who cannot tolerate Jesus' acceptance of a sinful woman's extravagant hospitality—she stood at his feet during dinner, weeping and bathing his feet with her tears and drying them with her hair. "She continued kissing his feet and anointing them with ointment."

If "sinner" means that the woman was a prostitute, then we can probably understand a seriously religious person like Simon reacting to the mere presence of a prostitute in his home—never mind her extravagant behavior toward Jesus. Merely *eating* in the presence of such a person would have been unacceptable, and a Jewish male who allowed such a woman to touch him in public or private would have transgressed more purity laws than we can number. The Pharisee, therefore, dismisses Jesus as a prophet unworthy of the title. In his mind, Jesus is a fraud closer to a prostitute than a prophet.

But Jesus demonstrates shocking grace and compassion toward the woman while turning the tables on his host. He castigates Simon for having failed to extend acceptable hospitality toward him, and he extols the woman for her unacceptable

hospitality. He accepts the unacceptable hospitality of a sinful woman and rejects the public righteousness of religious man.

Jesus Christ goes beyond theory to practice: he forgives the woman's sins and declares "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." In so doing, he overturns religious propriety and declares faith—mere *faith* expressed in unacceptable fashion—as the means of safety for troubled human beings.

There is much in life that troubles. Our own inner turmoil is mirrored by the injustice of human suffering and especially the unacceptable suffering and death of children. Yet here the Child of God invites his own suffering and death at the hands of religious sinners—in order that all might enjoy the blessings of safety and peace.

The table is set, and the Meal prepared. Christ, our Passover lamb, gives his own flesh and blood for us to eat and drink. Like a wanton prostitute, he gives himself to sinners—gives himself for us—that we too might go in peace, and Cooper with us. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.