

Stewards of our Mistakes

Mark 1:9-15

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The word is rarely used anymore, “stewards,” except in very fancy restaurants one may find a “wine steward,” or on a cruise ship there may be a “cabin steward.” Still, as everybody knows, the word “steward” described the classical Biblical category of “caretaker.” Thus Stewardship Season is the time of year we take note of our responsibility before God as “stewards” of our money - the way we manage our money. Likewise, we are often reminded in church that we are stewards of our talents, and of our time. In fact, the Bible insists on a much broader scale, that we are stewards of life itself, that life itself is a sort of loan from God, for which we are appointed caretakers; and that how we manage our years is finally the basis for our judgment. What I want to suggest is that the judgment of God is not as it is frequently caricatured: that final day when we shall be called to stand before the high court of the Almighty to answer for all the sins of all our days; rather, the judgment of the Lord is more like an annual review or semester exams. That is, God is too gracious, too fair-minded, not to give warning tickets. And so judgment really happens sequentially, periodically, not just finally. (After all, wouldn't you hate to have to answer on the final day of judgment for all you did as a teenager? I would hate to have to answer for just one Halloween night.) Judgment is more a process. It is a series of evaluations and fresh starts, of closed books and new beginnings. And that is why I want to suggest this first Sunday of the new year that God is a lot more interested in how we manage our mistakes than that we make them in the first place. You see, if the Bible understands stewardship as involving all of life, then surely we are stewards of our mistakes as well. After all, as Carlyle Marney used to say, “It is too late to worry about innocence anyway - that never was the issue.” The issue with which we must deal, indeed with which we do deal in one way or another, is not whether innocence or guilt. The issue is a management issue: what we do with our mistakes.

There is an insightful line in Lyndon Johnson's biography by Merle Miller in which the former President reflects on his handling of the Vietnam crisis. This, now, is in 1969, after he had left office. Johnson says in retrospect, “I never felt I had the luxury of reexamining my basic assumption. Once the decision to commit military force was made, all our energies were turned to vindicating that choice and finding a way somehow to make it work.” What a pity. What a tragedy for people to get locked into a set of assumptions - about themselves, about the world, about other people, whatever. Suppose Columbus never questioned the assumption that the world was flat. We'd all be speaking Spanish and living in Madrid. More importantly, because science can take care of itself, science assumes assumptions are to be questioned. So, too, must our

moral, ethical, and theological assumptions be managed if we are to avoid getting “locked in” at a lower level of development, never reaching the higher peaks of moral maturity.

That is why, you see, repentance is such a persistent theme in Scripture - because what is repentance, if it is not the reappraisal of old assumptions in order to proceed forward? The very word means “to turn.” To repent means to turn and take a new direction, and I don’t care what the tent evangelists say, repentance is a repeat performance. Like doing the dishes, it is one of those jobs that is no sooner finished that the sink begins to pile up all over again. We are never so naive as when we think a single conversion completes the job. Even St. Paul, who experienced as dramatic a conversion as anyone, continued to talk about his struggles with temptations to be a lesser self; and of his nagging inclinations to do those things he knew he ought not to do, and not to do those things he knew he ought to do. So even the saints knew they had to start over every morning. St. Paul knew, as you and I know, even when we don’t always act on the knowledge, that no one ever starts over at exactly the same place. Or to quote the cliché, “Experience is the best teacher.” We learn by doing, and let us hope we learn by our mistakes.

Some of the most helpful educational research has been done in the past twenty years by Harvard Professor Kohlberg who says the obvious (don’t know why it took us so long to figure it out). Kohlberg defines six stages of moral development, each building on the former. Kohlberg insists on the impossibility of anyone ever skipping a step, for moral development, he says, is a process. Only, now others are coming along and suggesting the same thing with faith development, defining identifiable stages in the development of faith. And that is why, you see, those radio preachers who promise a new life, total, and instantaneous (just make a simple confession and send a contribution) are frauds. Well-meaning frauds (maybe) but frauds nevertheless, because faith development - like physical development - like mental development - like emotional development, is a process, a sequence of fresh starts, a series of reexamining old assumptions.

Surely some of you have heard the stories of Preacher Gordon who for years served the First Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Florida. Preacher was much loved, much respected, but one of the most colorful characters that church ever produced. Indeed, the Preacher Gordon stories are legendary, because he did tend to be somewhat eccentric; but primarily he was known for his sharp wit and his gift for the quick comeback. Preacher never married, and consequently became the object of the attention of many of the older ladies of the congregation. Reportedly, a team would go to the manse every Monday morning to do his laundry. Preacher loved it, milked it for all it was worth. Well, one of Preacher’s doting admirers, an older dowager, moved away, and was gone for several years. Then one Sunday, she showed up in church. After the service, she did what no one should ever do to any minister - she gripped Preacher’s hand and said expectantly, “Preacher, I’ll bet you’ve forgotten my name.” With a wink, and not so much as a pause, Preacher said, “Darling, I had to forget your name in order to get on with my work.”

In a much more serious sense, that is what St. Paul is saying in his advice

to the Philippians, "Forgetting the past, press on in order to attain the higher calling." It is a principle of life that one must forget, be willing to let go of the past, in order to get on with one's work of growing. Who has not known firsthand the debilitating effect of trying to hang on to an old love, or worse, an old hatred, some old grudge grown moldy and long since overdue for discarding? What is there about us that we keep fueling old fueds, afraid somehow to let go of earlier assumptions, afraid of admitting error or ignorance? Growth - spiritual, emotional, intellectual - growth really, as much as anything else, is a matter of how we manage old assumptions. And so far as faith growth is concerned, so much hinges on our assumptions of God.

I knew a man in another church who would not take Communion because, as he put it, "I don't deserve it." Despite all my efforts to persuade him that God does not hold grudges and that the whole point of Communion is reconciliation, he was persuaded that his mistake, which for him stood in the way of God's acceptance, was too heinous to be forgotten, or forgiven. Somehow he could not, so long as I knew him, ever bring himself to reexamine his old assumption of God as a kind of austere Puritan presiding over life as if it were an old-fashioned spelling bee — one mistake and you're out!

Nothing could betray the truth of God more. The preeminent image of God (in Old as well as New Testament) is that of one quick to forgive, eager to forget in order to get on with the greater work of growth. The father who waits for the prodigal to return, the shepherd who goes out in search of the one wandering lamb, the woman who turns the house upside down looking for the lost coin; every one, images of a God who understands repentance as the primary ingredient for growth. Mistakenly, I'm afraid, most of us tend to think of repentance as a negative. (Repentance is like a trip to the Principal.) Whereas, Scripture insists the opposite. Repentance, insists Scripture, is a positive; repentance is a gift, actually. It is the offer of a fresh start. St. Paul says "It is the goodness of God that leads to repentance"; not God's harshness, not his judgment, but God's goodness. Repentance is positive.

Sam Keen has a book, the title of which is better than the book, "Beginnings Without End." Now that's a phrase to get your theological teeth into, "Beginnings Without End," because what better describes the character of God than one who never runs out of beginnings - or for whom it is never too late to begin, not even at death. And that is why traditionally the church has chosen the baptism of Jesus as the Scripture lesson for the first Sunday in the new year; because of all the intellectual and emotional baggage baptism carries with it. For Jesus, baptism meant the beginning of his ministry. It was Inauguration Day. For us, baptism has come to mean birth, and rebirth, repentance and regeneration, chapters closed and chapters opened. It carries with it the idea of reexamining old decisions and reappraising old assumptions, but the promise of baptism is always "a beginning." Remember Jesus' words, "The time is fulfilled," meaning "the time is ripe." (God is ready when you are.) "The time is ripe. . . the kingdom of God is at hand. . . repent and believe the gospel." The point is, friends, and please don't miss it on the first Sunday of the new year, the point of Jesus' sermon is "With God, your future is always more important than your past." God is always more interested in our growth

than in our innocence, which never was the issue anyway. No, it is not our mistakes, not even their number, that matter most to God. It is what we do with them. Becoming responsible stewards of our mistakes and growing from them is the essence of repentance and the greater concern of God.

We began with Lyndon Johnson's confession that he never had the luxury of examining old assumptions; let's end with another world leader. One day a belligerent young man stormed at Mahatma Ghandi: "You have no integrity," he charged. "Last week I heard you say one thing, today you are saying something entirely different. How can you justify such vacillation?" With his characteristic quietness, Ghandi responded, "It is quite simple. I have learned something since last week."

Would that Lyndon Johnson had claimed his right, taken the time, seized the moment, to reexamine old assumptions. The shape of the nation, if not the world, might be quite different today. Well, here's a line of hope lifted out of James Reston's New Year's editorial. Reston writes: "The hopeful thing at the turn of the year is that thoughtful people all over the world, even in governments, are beginning to question their own prejudices and plan anew for the future." Imagine here at the beginning of a new year, imagine, should Protestants and Catholics in Ireland ever allow themselves the luxury of examining their worn-out assumptions about each other, or blacks and whites in South Africa (or in Atlanta), or Jews and Arabs; or those, for that matter, on both sides who assume the only way to insure peace is to prepare for war. Just imagine, should such ever allow themselves the luxury of reexamining old assumptions. But then the text was never intended for heads of state alone. Who of us does not enter the new year loaded with old guilts, mistakes, sins, and long held assumptions never really examined? assumptions about ourselves? about others, and the world? assumptions about God, faith, the church and our commitment to it? Who of us is utterly innocent? But that is not the issue, never was. One of the gifts the gospel gives us is the luxury of repentance - the freedom to admit error and start anew.