

“A VISIT FROM THE GUILT FAIRY”

February 11, 2007

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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I have to admit, I stole this morning's sermon title. I saw it about twenty years ago as I was driving by University Congregational Church in Seattle, right up there on the reader board. This Sunday: Preacher: The Rev. Paul Flucke, Sermon:

“A Visit from the Guilt Fairy.” I smiled for blocks. And I have thought about it often, how clever this title is. It sort of lets you know what's coming in the sermon, but in a quiet, beguiling way that doesn't set your back up immediately.

Any preacher who deals seriously with the Bible from time to time has to find a way to preach about the duplicity, the dishonesty of the human heart. It's a major theme in the biblical literature, and in Christian literature in general. This morning we have Jeremiah lamenting, “The human heart is devious above all else: it is perverse who can understand it?” But we could just have easily have heard Paul saying, “The good that I would do, I do not do; and that which I would not do, I do.” Or we could read large parts of Augustine's Confessions. Or Edmund Spenser's The Fairie Queen. Or Anne Lamott lamenting her evil twin who sometimes comes out to control her. From whatever angle we look, there is a lot in Christianity that tells us that we don't on our own do a great job at being good, much less doing good; and if goodness is what we want, if following God is what we want, then the last thing we should trust as our moral guide and compass is our heart, our immediate feelings.

Now I can see some of you frowning out there.

Since the 1960s, as a culture we have tended towards a positive and, I would say from a biblical perspective, an overly simplistic view of human nature. I grew up in the generation in the late 60s that proclaimed, “I'm ok, you're ok” and “If it feels good, do it!” By the 1980s Joseph Campbell was telling us to follow our bliss and 1990s pop psychology was heavily into affirmations and avoiding negative self-talk. A quick trip through the self-help section of Borders yesterday didn't seem to indicate that much has changed along these lines. We want to believe that we can trust ourselves, that left to our own devices we will want what is good for us and what is right. We conveniently ignore everything from obesity statistics to the variety of addictions that plague our culture to the mountain of data that tells us that even though we know our wasteful environmental behaviors are wrong and eventually suicidal, still most of us do not change how we drive, or how we shop, or how we consume in general.

Can we trust ourselves, or do we perhaps need those voices from outside ourselves that say “no” and “stop” and “this is wrong,” even though you want it and it feels good in the short term? Do we even need from time to time a visit from the guilt fairy, hovering on our shoulder, whispering in our ear that we should feel bad and yes, well, guilty about whatever direction our impulsive hearts are leading us?

If there is any emotion that has gotten a bad rap over the past several decades, it is guilt. I found myself wondering this week when and why we decided that guilt per se is a bad thing, that we shouldn't ever feel bad about ourselves. When and on what data did we decide that an unrelieved diet of positivity will make us whole? I want to be clear here. I know that there are those who were and are still raised on a steady diet of guilt and shame and feeling bad about themselves.

I also know there are specific segments of Christianity that have linked sinfulness and guilt and being bad, and made that terrifying message the full scope of what God has to say to us about being human. And all of that is wrong and damaging to us in every way; and most important here, it is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But that doesn't mean the gospel tells us we can have an unrelievedly sunny view of human nature.

I think it is important in this morning's lesson from Jeremiah that the prophet calls the human heart not good or bad, but devious. Devious is a complex word that opens up a more complicated view and a much more nuanced dialogue about who we are than simply good or bad. And I think that complicated view is essential both to a proper sense of ourselves and to good theology. We human creatures, we are capable, individually and as groups, of amazing acts of selfless love and principle. Think of entire towns that hid Jews during the holocaust. Think of individual acts of love and generosity you have witnessed. That's part of who we are and it should be celebrated.

But look also at how many times whole societies of good people have stood silent in the face of injustice. Look at the small and large acts of selfishness, violence, or just plain bad judgment apparent all around us and inside of us. There are times we are guilty, and we should feel not good about who we are and what we've done. There are times when the guilt fairy is our best friend, winging her thoughtful way onto our left shoulder, whispering to our impulsive and self-indulgent hearts that there is a better choice for us, and we know it, and we should pay attention to it.

It's usually not a big choice. Most of us don't have the opportunity to make choices that change the course of human civilization in one decision.

But we do make choices that impact us and the people we love; and we do make choices that in the aggregate, change the course of human civilization. Will I exercise today or take the day off? Is this the day I'll quit lying to my dentist about how often I floss? Will I call that person I've been avoiding now for so long that the thought of calling grows ever more uncomfortable? Will I write a letter to a political official? Will I have a drink? Will I be honest with my partner? What car will I choose? What clothes will I buy? Where will I give my money? How will I vote? These are choices we make every day. And the question is, "How do we decide? What voice or voices do we listen to in making our decisions?"

I would suggest this morning that one place we look for guidance is in taking seriously the part of belonging to a religious tradition that affirms we believe, we come to the church, not just for comfort, not just for affirmation, but also for discipline, for direction, and yes, even for correction. There's a reason for the "Thou shalt nots" and the other imperatives of the Bible. There is blessing for most of us in visits from the guilt fairy. I learned in American History class that Thomas Jefferson took his Bible and cut it up, tossed out the stuff that he considered bad or irrelevant and kept the rest.

It's tempting, I know... but I would argue that very few of us, maybe not even Thomas himself, are spiritually mature enough to do that well. We need the parts of the Bible and our tradition that poke at us like this morning's reading from Jeremiah or Luke's version of the beatitudes we need the parts that challenge our complacency and our selfishness; we need the parts we hate, the parts that confound us, just like we need the guilt fairy, because in the long run all of these can help us make decisions for our lives that are good and life-giving and filled with integrity.

If we rely only on our devious, impulsive, not always clear-thinking hearts, then we can so easily become lost, or at least not become the people we could be, the people we want to be.

A wise friend reminded me earlier this week that God loves us enough to take us as we are, no matter where we are; but God also loves us enough never to leave us where God finds us. That is the rich and complex truth of our religion. It speaks to the complicated nature of who we are as human; it challenges us towards our becoming; it recognizes the role of scripture, tradition, community, and even the much maligned guilt fairy; and most of all, it reminds us that God's greatest gift to us is the gift of meaning: the amazing grace that what we do, the choices we make, where we decide to give and spend ourselves, all of it is of real consequence. So choose carefully. Use the resources beyond yourself that can help you choose well. And when the guilt fairy comes to whisper caution in your ear, try to thank God for yet one more blessing. Thanks be to God. Amen.