

Parables of Growth:
Already All Right

Texts on Sunday, August 29, 2004:
Readings: Mark 2: 1-12; Romans 5: 18-21
Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

You have a sense, don't you, how hard it is to be a human being—what an immense weight is a human life; what an heroic feat to carry this soul, your own self, from the cradle you never asked for to the bed you will not ask to rise from? When you consider your own life, the astounding hopes you have sheltered, the falling trees that have crashed in your forest, the edgeless pleasures which have whistled through your body and your mind, the wracking uncertainties, the overwhelming gratefulness, the illnesses, the heat of loves, the drenching fears and on and on. . . . When you take this in, fully, quietly, in the way you might look out over a lake at summer's end, or cast your gaze into the sapphire of space by night ; when you take this in, and you consider that one by one, every man and woman and child on earth--there are more than 6,000,000,000 of us--is carrying one of these souls thence hence--a flame in an earthen vessel--then all that is left to your open-mouthed soul-searching is awe for the Creation, mixed with stupefaction that we are so short with one another, so unyielding, so unforgiving, toward them and toward ourselves, so afraid, so wrapped up in our own blanket, so angry, so defensive, so ready to make another war. Why? We are all paralytics, all bound. Once you set this human condition on the scale, it seems impossible that we have not experienced sheer admiration for what they have done with the infinite and eternal package of consciousness handed them; impossible that we are not headlong down the aisle, down to the stage and the footlights shouting encouragement, comfort, or just lines to help any player who has miserably dropped his lines, lost her place, become addicted, wrecked relationships, exploded in crime, ruined her body, started a war, made golf a god, yelled at his wife...

Peace, peace, peace. Nothing can harm you! To love them, all of them, no matter what they've done, or who they've been--this can never diminish--can only bless--you, and them. All that matters on earth is compassion for them, and for yourself, for how hard it is to

live. For you see, love--the way Jesus showed it to you and you got it, maybe when you were young, maybe just now, or maybe you've lost it--love like Jesus' is not hard work. It is only a question of giving something up--the chatter in your mind that sustains fear and separation. God's love is what happens when you stop struggling for your place in the world--no one has a seat here anyway--and let it be. Then you see what everyone is up against, why so many stumble hard and break their teeth, why the world attacks the wretched, and adores those who've bought a comfortable seat and dressed for life's show. When you see what everyone is doing, then you love. Even your enemies you love. You take up your pallet and go.

When you see. But most of the time, we have not been seeing and loving like this. Why is that? Why are the moral judgments of church people and the harsh hatreds of society at large cut from the same pattern? Why is news of a congregation of blessed ex-offenders or alcoholics even news? Wasn't that where Mr. Jesus spent almost all his time? Why does church talk so much of Jesus and walk so little his way?

The gospel stories offer an answer to this puzzle. It's not easy for the church to hear. It's this: *If you don't know you're forgiven, you're paralyzed and you can't love full out.* The maxim works the other way too: *If you're paralyzed--that is, if you only love people you like--the reason you're paralyzed is that you're not forgiven.* Which means, you don't believe it, not really, not me, not yet. Is this awful, that a Christian, however comfortable in the pew, is forced out of the closet as an un-believer in God's forgiveness through Christ? Yes, awful! horrible! inadmissible! -- if you don't believe you're forgiven. If you don't believe you're already all right, you sure can't admit that anything's wrong. But if the light of the Son is creeping through cracks in your closet, and you see that acts of Love alone reveal who has let grace be, and who has not, then you can lighten up. It's hard to be human, to be infinity in a bottle, cast upon a sea of doubt. Have compassion on yourself for having had so little compassion for others. Get over it! God has. "Your sins are forgiven. You are already all right. Stand up, take your mat, and go to your home."

Now someone might object to this bad news good news of freedom for the wretched, and proof of unbelief among the churchied. Such a person might say, *I certainly do believe in my own forgiveness! I have*

accepted Christ and his promise of life after death. But everyone hasn't accepted him. They're not forgiven, and I'm not about to show absolute love toward criminals and selfish people and lazy do-nothings and ... and But such a person has already lost her faith. You can tell that by how hard she is trying to keep it, rather than give it away. Is this awful? No, not if she can see it.

But if she cannot see how hard she is trying to justify herself, her short life is tragic. For love and the kingdom are paralyzed as long as she cannot see that forgiveness is not earned, not by any word, or any act, not even by right-worded confessions of the good news of God. Forgiveness just is. It is the way of God with his creatures. The paralytic is let down slowly into the room where Jesus is speaking, and Jesus, seeing the faith of his friends--that is, being compassion for how noble and arduous is the human journey--Jesus says, "Son, your sins are forgiven." *They always were, long before you were let into this room, long before you knew my name. You didn't do anything to get your sins forgiven; neither did your friends. Your sins: they just are forgiven. That's the way it is with God and God's Word. Seeing this, you can rise and walk home. If you can't see this, your paralysis will remain. Love will not move. Judgment will run your thoughts like dogs in the ruts your old life dug. Nothing new will come. But the Word from the beginning awaits you always: Your sins are forgiven.*

As Carlyle Marney says so winningly in his lectures called "The Coming Faith," a Christian has no advantage over anyone else on earth, so far as God's favor is concerned. The only difference, the only advantage if you will, is that we know God's good will and love for all. Still we see that we have lived like paralytics, lying on the mat of our life, unliving, unconnected to the world's need, focused on our own sorrows and incapacities. We see this. The paralysis of unforgiveness has touched our members.

The Jesus story today is like a parable because we can see parts of ourselves in each of its characters. In the paralytic. In Jesus himself, who calls us to declare God's forgiveness everywhere. And also in the four friends. The four friends stand for the power of the faithful to lift a person whose love is paralyzed into the presence of Christ. The story says that Jesus' word is not magic. Rather, God's word moves through the faith of the faithful, to show absolute love to you, to anyone, even though he or she is paralyzed with fear and unforgiveness.

I have long imagined a church whose members are so excited by this ultimate game of life that they push everything off life's coffee table to play it; that they and all they meet might come alive to the possibility of human communion; to run every day to the laboratory to try new experiments in being Jesus for the world. As I look back over years of my own words and methods for helping groups of four friends assemble for mutual upbuilding in becoming like Jesus, my efforts look tentative and ineffective. I believe the reason is that I have been living like the paralytic, unforgiven in some profound, unseen ways. Is that awful? No. Seeing what is so is the beginning of great blessing. It is the sign of the new birth, the parable of life eternal.

Whatever in you is paralyzed -- that part cannot move herself down to the house in town where the word is sure: Your sins are forgiven. You need friends, soul friends. If you want this if you want to play the game of life called Jesus Christ--come down now. You are already all right.

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Anyone who, being reduced by misery to the state of a passive and inert thing, comes back for a time to the state of human being by means of the generosity of another--that person, if he knows how to welcome and senses the true essence of this generosity, receives in that instant a soul issued solely from love and nothing else--born from on high by water and the spirit. To treat the wretched neighbor with love is something like baptizing him.

--Simone Weil