

The Collect: LORD, we pray thee that thy grace may always constrain and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Epistle. Ephesians 4:1-16 I THEREFORE, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

The Gospel. St. Luke 14:1-11

IT came to pass, as Jesus went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy.¹ And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go and answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things. And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; and he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Stop The Narrative

I was in a counseling situation recently and the most amazing realization came to me. It is that we are the most amazing complex creatures. It should not have come as such a shock and surprise to me because we are made in the image of God himself. We are creatures most wonderfully made, somewhat less than God, as one author put it. And even though pastors are not clinically trained, we must be prepared not only to wrestle with the complexities of our own psychologies as we work out the salvation of our own souls in the presence of God, but we must also be prepared to wrestle with the psychologies of others. Socrates has said: know thyself, Jeremiah had said – how can we – since the heart of man is so deceitfully wicked and so desperately corrupt, who can know it? The Bible says that we can't know ourselves at first because we can't face ourselves. We can't face ourselves so we generate a false narrative about ourselves. And every sinner's narrative comes out looking the same. We are the hero in a tragic tale of suffering, pain and loss.

Suspiciously, no matter what happens to us, we always come out as the hero. Every narrative, every part of every script of the lives we live always comes out the same: the world is out to destroy us; yet we stand nobly against the world, trying to be true to ourselves.

If you think my understanding of human psychology spurious, read *Don Quixote*, said by some to be not only one of the most influential novels ever written, but even though first published in 1604, it has been called the first modern novel. And you can see this very plainly if you see the Broadway version of this – *Man of La Mancha*. Let me quote some of its quintessential dialogue: *I have lived nearly fifty years, and I have seen life as it is. Pain, misery, hunger ... cruelty beyond belief. I have heard the singing from taverns and the moans from bundles of filth on the streets. I have been a soldier and seen my comrades fall in battle ... or die more slowly under the lash in Africa. I have held them in my arms at the final moment. These were men who saw life as it is, yet they died despairing. No glory, no gallant last words ... only their eyes filled with confusion, whimpering the question, "Why?" "I do not think they asked why they were dying, but why they had lived. When life itself seems lunatic, who knows where madness lies?*

This is the existential orthodoxy that is so powerfully entrenched in the modern psyche, that we are crucified the moment we challenge it. Because in the modern world, the real enemy is not the butchering Moslem; it is not the brutal, scientific materialist. It is not even the heartless fascist or communist who would send millions of souls to the gulag or to the grave in order to implement a brave new utopian world. The enemy is much closer at home. Says C. S. Lewis in the *Screwtape Letters*: *The greatest evil is not now done in those sordid "dens of crime" that Dickens loved to paint. It is not done even in concentration camps and labour camps. In those we see its final result. But it is conceived and ordered (moved, seconded, carried, and minuted) in clean, carpeted, warmed and well-lighted offices, by quiet men with white collars and cut fingernails and smooth-shaven cheeks who do not need to raise their voices. Hence, naturally enough, my symbol for Hell is something like the bureaucracy of a police state or the office of a thoroughly nasty business concern.*

You can see the problem of the modern narrative very plainly if every you do any marriage counseling. And of course the gold standard in telling this story – of how two conflicting narratives about who is evil and who is good cannot both be true – that there cannot be two heroes in any divorce – for that matter, there can't even be one hero in any divorce – that is told in the story of

Kramer vs Kramer, one of the most powerful pieces of theater about the modern existential dilemma ever written. I cannot over-emphasize the power of this movie. The two main characters were played by two of the greatest character actors of all time – Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep. It received five Academy Awards at the 52nd Academy Awards in 1980, in the categories of Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actor, and Best Supporting Actress. This is in our era.

Now imagine breaking into these hellish, humanistic demonic narratives with our Gospel story. Because, after all, the Gospel is about irreconcilable differences. And it is about divorce. It is about an attempted reconciliation. It is about a protracted, ugly, nasty court battle, between modern man and God. It is a really a custody battle – over the soul of man. Who will get custody – man or God? And of course just as in the movie, Kramer vs Kramer there are the divorce lawyers. In the movie, both characters are completely unprepared for the character assassinations that are unleashed upon each other in the court battle.

But in the battle for the souls of men, in which we are a kind of paralegal aid to the Paraclete himself, the opposing attorney is none other than Satan himself. The theologians tells us that Satan fell because of pride. He tried to take the highest seat, and he was forcefully removed and humiliatingly put in a lower seat. And you can imagine that if the modern, human psychosis concerning the goodness of God lives in us, represented by plays like Man of LaMancha or Kramer vs Kramer, you can imagine what it must look like in the soul of Satan himself. It actually came to me last night about what Satan must be whispering in the ear of all his clients.

“You know, I once loved God too. And, I guess, I still love him. But he betrayed me. Horribly. And I will never forgive him for that.” The theologians don’t tell us if Satan ever got any therapy for this – or whether he just stormed off to the abyss. But it certainly would explain a lot of things. It would explain why he demanded that Jesus show him some respect in the desert, for example. That’s all he was asking. That’s all he ever wanted, he would say. “Respect is a two way street,” he might have argued.

But not with God, not with this. Because all Satan’s beauty was a gift from God. But Satan was taking thankless pride in his beauty as if it were his own. But God could not honor this kind of pride. God took pride in him because he was beautiful. But Satan took pride in himself. And his beauty died that day. Because he no longer derived his beauty from God. He tried to derive it from himself. He rejected God’s narrative and he created his own. And he fell. And the Scriptures say: *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.*

According to the Church, the greatest practical sin is pride. It is pride in oneself. It is believing in oneself, when we are told to believe in God. When the Holy Spirit comes to us to convict us of sin and convince us to repent and to embrace the reconciliation of God, we say: no, it is God who is at fault. He has sinned against me, not me against him. It is he that needs to make an apology – for hurting me, for dishonoring me; for ruining my life. Reconciliation with him is out of the question because he will never admit that he is wrong.

We have talked about the unforgiveable sin of refusing the reconciliation of God, even after he has sent his own son as an expiation for us. We asked for compensation. And God gave it to us. And he says: "Here is compensation for *your* sin; not mine. Here is all I can give. Here is the life and honor of my own son." And we live in a world, in which the court case against God goes on and on. Even when the spirit of truth comes into our souls and witnesses to the truth itself, we reject it. And we doggedly clutch at our own narrative. We will exalt our seat above the stars of God. You remember the song? And the world will be better for this that one man, scorned and covered with scars, still strove with his last ounce of courage To reach the unreachable stars! To vindicate his narrative.

So this is why there is only one deep, psychological sin which, by its very nature, cannot be forgiven. And that sin is rejecting the testimony of truth itself. Jesus has said: *All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men.*

The witness of God century after century soul after soul, ceaselessly struggles with the destructive, self-centered, self-righteous narratives of the human soul – like *The Man From LaMancha* - a play within a play - an existentialism that always comes out the same but is never true – that God is to be blamed for the evils of the world and we are its pitiful but noble victims. And even when people see the evidence before their eyes that this is not true - that they have rudely and arrogantly taken a seat impossibly high, above even the throne of God, they still do not believe. They will not believe.

This is the world in which we preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If our churches are overflowing with a message like this, something is wrong. Because people do not naturally flock to the truth. They don't come to a place to have their narratives about their own righteousness completely broken up. I didn't. And you didn't. And we must help ourselves every day, as hard as we can – in prayer and in words of encouragement to keep us looking into God's narrative about our soul. It is a song we can hardly bear and we like Ulysses must lash ourselves to Scripture, to the Church and to each other's care to bear it.

It is a song about the next life, in which the misery and sorrow and pain of this world will never be remembered. There we will sit in a noble and glorious seat at the table of the gods, far above anything that we could have imagined. A seat not that we have taken or that we deserve. But a seat purchased for the unworthy with the blood and sweat and tears of the most worthy son of the living God. – Amen

¹ Probably some form of adema