

WILDERNESS TEMPTATIONS

March 1, 2009

Post Christian Church and Post Presbyterian Church

Mark 1:5-15

The Patron Saint of Liars is a book by an author named Ann Patchett that tells the story of Rose Clinton and her daughter, Cecilia, who live at Saint Elizabeth's Home for Unwed Mothers in Habit, Kentucky. I loved everything about this book except the ending but I want to share with you today one of the very revealing and priceless excerpts from this book. Rose is the cook and Cecilia is the darling of the place, petted and mothered by all the young women who will give their own babies up for adoption.

One May day when she is fifteen years old, Cecilia meets one of the new girls who has come to Saint Elizabeth's. Her name is Lorraine. She is skinny, with a head of red curls and she is about to have a nervous breakdown while she waits to be interviewed by Mother Corinne, the nun in charge. Cecilia decides to help Lorraine out by giving her some advice.

“The guy who got you pregnant,” Cecilia tells Lorraine. “Don’t say he’s dead. Everybody does that. It makes Mother Corinne crazy.”

Lorraine sits on her hands and is quiet for a minute. “I was going to say that,” she says.

“See?”

“So what do I tell her?”

“I don’t know,” Cecilia says. “Tell her the truth. “Or tell her you don’t remember.”

“What did you tell her?” Lorraine asks and Cecilia is speechless.

“I sat there, absolutely frozen,” Cecilia wrote later. “I felt like I had just been mistaken for some escaped mass murderer. I felt like I was going to be sick, but that would only have proved her assumption. No one had ever, ever mistaken me for one of them, not even as a joke. The lobby felt small and airless. I thought I was going to pass out.”

“It was because Cecilia had been mistaken for one of them—one of the weak people whose bad decisions had derailed their lives, who

had done something so shameful that their own families had packed them off to live with strangers until the evidence could be put up for adoption. In theological terms, Cecilia thought she was going to pass out because she had been mistaken for a sinner, when she had done absolutely nothing wrong.

It was not that Cecilia disliked sinners. She had grown up with them. She was friendly and helpful and gave them good advice. She just never expected to be mistaken for one of them, because in her own mind she was of another order of being. She was a virgin, and she thought it was something anyone could see.” (**Home By Another Way**, p.33)

Like Cecilia, it is much easier for us to be friendly and helpful to sinners and even give them wise counsel and good advice. It is an entirely different ballgame to be mistaken for one! On the first Sunday of Lent, we are confronted with the sin in our lives and asked to reflect upon the temptations we face and the choices we make in our everyday lives. The traditional text for the first Sunday in Lent is the story of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River and then being tempted by the devil in the wilderness after his baptism. These verses were most likely chosen for the first

Sunday in Lent as a not too subtle reminder of our own struggle in the spiritual wilderness of our lives.

In a wonderful essay entitled, “**Sinner, Wretch and Reprobate,**” Kathleen Norris reclaims for us a word that makes many of us uncomfortable, “wretch.” It’s in the hymn, Amazing Grace...that saved a wretch like me. Its connotation is so negative that some newer hymnals have replaced it with, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved someone like me.” Kyle has an uncle who once said he refuses to sing that hymn because he is certainly not going to call himself a wretch. But, as Norris explains, wretch originally meant someone who is lost, banished, in exile, a wanderer looking for home, someone who knows that there is a better place to be but can’t go there on his or her own. She writes:

“Maybe there is someone who only thinks of good things in the middle of the night, who never lies awake regretting the selfish, nigh unforgivable, things that he or she has done. Maybe the unconscious of some people does tell them they are OK all the time. But, I wonder. I suspect that anyone who has not experienced wretchedness, exile, wandering, loss, misery, whether

inwardly or in outward circumstance, has a superficial grasp of what it means to be human.”

I believe that each of us, to some degree or another, at some level of integrity, known perhaps to no one but ourselves, knows about wretchedness, lostness, and exile from each other and our inmost selves. I suspect that each of us knows about some kind of dishonesty, unfaithfulness, or betrayal. And most likely, I believe that deep in that core of integrity which is our spirit, we know God’s absence and long for God’s presence.

Lent is the time when we think about all that. Lent is the time when we ponder our sinfulness, God’s amazing grace, God’s infinite love and patience, and God’s coming to us all the way to the cross to bridge the gap, to offer forgiveness, and to put back together what we can not fix ourselves.

In a sermon entitled, “**The River of Life,**” Barbara Brown Taylor said the Jordan River was “teeming with sinners---faulty, sorry, guilty human beings---who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. If you have ever read the arrest record in the newspaper, then you know the kinds of things most of them were guilty of---drunk driving, bad checks,

petty larceny, assault. Some of them were notorious sinners and some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had come to be cleaned. They knew they were not clean.

Then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. No one knew anything about him yet. In Mark's gospel, there are no accounts of Jesus' birth. His life begins with his baptism, so the crowds did not part when he appeared. He simply took his place in line and waited his turn, but later, after the heavens were torn apart and the voice from heaven made clear who he was, there was a lot of controversy. What was he doing in that crowd of sinners, looking and acting like one of them? What did he have to be sorry about, and why was God's Beloved submitting himself to a scruffy character like John?"

If Jesus had listened more to his public relations people and opinion polls, he would have been more like Cecilia wanted to be and the many well-intentioned Christians in our country want to be---a friend to sinners, a kind and loving helper, but never mistaken for one of them. As Barbara Brown Taylor so eloquently says, "Jesus' handlers would never, ever have allowed him to be baptized. He could have stood on the shore and offered words of

encouragement to those going into the water, yes. He could have held out his hand to those who struggled out of the river in their heavy wet clothes, yes, but he could not under any circumstances have gone into the waters himself, unless it was to tap John on the shoulder and say, ‘Hey, you go rest. I’ll take over for a while.’

“Even if he were innocent, even if his intentions were nothing but good, it was ruinous to his reputation. Who was going to believe that he was there just because he cared about those people and refused to separate himself from them? Gossip being what it was, who was not going to think that he had just a few teeny-weeny things to get off his conscience before he went into public ministry?

You see the problem. We spend a lot of time in the Christian church talking about God’s love for sinners, but we sure do go to a lot of trouble not to be mistaken for one of them. Guilt by association and all that. Only Jesus---our leader and our Lord---did not seem too concerned about that. In him, God’s being-with-us included God’s being in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance and the joy of new life with us. So what if he did not have anything of his own to be sorry about?”

As we get older and life has its way with us, I'd like to think we become more able to identify with the weak ones in our midst as well as with the strong ones, with the ones who never seem to have their act together as well as with the ones who never seem to slip up. One of my favorite quotes is from the book, **Diary of a Modern Pilgrim** by the minister of the First Baptist Church in Austin, Texas for several years. His name was Browning Ware and he has this to say about the profound importance of God's presence in our midst. "When I was younger, I thought there was an answer to every problem. And for a time I knew many of the answers. I knew about parenting until I had children. I knew about divorce until I got one. I knew about suicide until three of my closest friends took their lives in the same year. I knew about the death of a child until my son died. I'm not impressed with answers as I once was. Answers seem so pallid, sucked dry and void of life. Knowing answers seduces us into making pronouncements and I'm discovering that wisdom and adversity replace cocksure ignorance with thoughtful uncertainty. More important than the answer is the Answerer. 'Thou art with me,' --- that's what we most crave."

When Jesus stepped into the river, he became one with us and he wrapped himself up with all human beings: the good ones and the

bad ones, the well ones and the hurt ones, the brave ones and the weak ones, the ones who have answers for everything as well as the ones who can only ask the questions, the successful ones and the ones who can never get anything right. When we practice the sacrament of baptism, we too proclaim the good news that God has come among us in the flesh. Barbara Brown Taylor concludes, “Whether we are carried in our mother’s arms to the place of baptism or whether we arrive under our own conviction, we get into the river of life with Jesus and all his flawed kin. There is not a chance we will ever be mistaken for one of them, because we are them, thanks be to God, as they are us: Christ’s own forever.”

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God, we gather on this beautiful winter morning hoping to experience a sense of the holy and be open to the possibility and potential that awaits us when we ponder our sins and all that alienates us. As we remember the baptism of Jesus this Sunday, we are reminded of the grace that claimed us long ago and the faith that sustains us in our everyday living. We are grateful that Jesus took his place in line with the sinners of the day, was baptized by John in the Jordan, and came out of the water with a clearer focus of his purposes, a deeper love for humanity and a better understanding of the griefs and sins that weigh us down. Because Jesus joined us in the flesh and in the water, he leads us from where we are and never asks us to go anywhere he has not already been---he knows what we are up against and has shown us how to live so that life never ends.

We acknowledge that in handling the many aspects of our lives this past week we have been too consumed by our busy agendas, too caught up in our petty concerns, and too oblivious to the opportunities for service that would land us closer to the presence

of God in our world. Help us, O Lord, to stop a little each day and give thanks for the lot that is our life –for the good that nourishes and sustains us and for the challenges and difficulties that reminds us of our dependence upon you and our community. With grateful hearts, help us to see that all of life is pure gift and enable us to more fully open our lives to the opportunities for service, faith and growth that await our hungry souls.

We ask that your presence would be a guide to our loved ones who are sick, grieving, heartbroken, hurt, depressed, and struggling with life-changing issues. Help us to pray for them and with them and to find creative ways to be God's heart and hands to them so that we are all made more whole by life's difficulties and tragedies. In the name of our Lord Jesus who showed us how to live and how to love, we pray, Our Father...Amen.