

Great Sinners

Many years ago, my wife and I were at a small dinner party given by a friend who was our parents' generation, a man long divorced and living alone; and at one point in the evening he started to talk about Great Sinners. By that he meant not only people whose sins were great, but who themselves were considered great, people who had done great things but were nonetheless notorious sinners. I forget exactly how the subject came up; I think it was partly because, though I wasn't ordained at the time, he knew I was a committed Christian, and there was also an Episcopal clergyman among the other guests; but it was also because he himself (our host) was a man of means and achievements, and of powerful appetites, which he regularly and unapologetically indulged.

So: Great Sinners. The first thing to say in that conversation (and I did) is this: there is no human who is not a sinner. So when we talk about Great Sinners, we have to acknowledge it's just logical: the more powerful the person, the greater the sins that person is capable of committing, and is likely to commit.

When we look at the cast of characters in the Bible, probably the first person to come up in this category would be David. We just heard one of the most famous stories in the Old Testament, David's defeat of Goliath, the giant Philistine warrior, in single combat, armed with nothing but a sling and a stone, instantly becoming both a legend and a national hero. The cycle of David stories occupies forty-two chapters, over three books, and gives us plenty of examples both of his heroics and of his sinfulness. Certainly one of the latter was his adulterous affair with

Bathsheba, the wife of one of his captains, Uriah the Hittite, and David's subsequent elimination of Uriah as an impediment by ordering that he be placed in the front of a dangerous battle so that he would be killed, which he was.

That would be probably the most extreme example of David's sinfulness, but there were others. So the question arises, why was he so uniquely revered through the history of the nation of Israel? Why was he so absolutely pre-eminent among its kings? Of course there were practical reasons: he was a great warrior and military leader, and a skillful politician. He made Israel great again. (We can imagine little red MIGA hats.)

But there was always unquestionably a powerful spiritual dimension to the reverence people had for David, during his lifetime and over the centuries. Why did God, from the start, look on David with such favor? Why did people call Jesus "Son of David", thereby proclaiming that they recognized something of Jesus' unique, unprecedented relation to God?

In the reading we heard today from 1 Samuel, of course, we see the startling power of David's faith, and the way it instantly translates into action: he jumps to volunteer to fight Goliath because Goliath "has defied the armies of the living God"; and when Goliath trash-talks him David is right in his face, praising God for his certain victory: "This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand...so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear...." The transcendent power of David's faith stares us in the face.

But there's a particular aspect of that power at work in today's story; something we see in a couple of things he says to Saul, something that's a teaching for us now today, for people of any time and place. When Saul at first refuses David's offer to fight Goliath because he's just a boy, obviously with no chance against this giant, David tells him, as we heard: I was a shepherd, and sometimes a bear or a lion would grab a lamb from the flock; but I wasn't afraid: I knew how I could kill them, which I did, and I got the lamb back.

And then when Saul says okay, and gives him armor and a helmet and a sword to fight with, David tries them on and right away says, I can't fight with these, they're too heavy. I know how I can fight. And he gets his sling and some stones, and the rest is history.

So what do these two elements of the story point to? What's this dimension of David's faith I'm talking about?

I think it's actually well expressed in a brief story from quite a different context. I'm going to yank us out of the Bible here, to an actual historical occurrence, something which happened almost 80 years ago, involving two great figures from the performing arts – specifically, the world of dance. One was the legendary Martha Graham, the great dancer and teacher who developed the technique that's the basis of modern dance. The other was Agnes de Mille, a dancer who eventually became one of Broadway's most successful choreographers. But de Mille had just begun that part of her career when, in 1943, she was offered a job choreographing a new musical, called "Oklahoma", which I'm sure you know became

an instant classic. Opening night was a gigantic success, the show got rave reviews, and de Mille was suddenly the new star in the world of choreography.

But she knew – she felt in her heart - that her work in “Oklahoma” had not been that great – she thought, fair at best - and all the acclaim she was getting only increased the despair she felt, that she would ever be any good as a choreographer.

So she called up Martha Graham, whom she knew (the world of dance is a small one), and they met at a little lunch counter and over a soda, as de Mille put it, “I confessed to her that I had a burning desire to be excellent, but no faith that I could be.” (This feeling is of course common to people in any human pursuit.) And this is her memory of what Martha Graham said to her, in response:

“There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it. It is not your business to determine how good it is nor how valuable nor how it compares with other expressions. It is your business to keep it clearly and directly, to keep the channel open. You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work. You have to keep yourself open....Keep the channel open....No artist is pleased. [There is] no satisfaction whatever at any time. There is only a queer divine dissatisfaction, a blessed unrest, that keeps us marching and makes us more alive....”

Now, it seems clear to me, as I hope it does to you, that what Martha Graham was talking about is what we Christians call the Holy Spirit: the Spirit of God that is alive and at work uniquely in each of us: the Spirit for whom it is our call to keep the

channel open. What Graham describes as “a queer divine dissatisfaction” and “blessed unrest” is simply the awareness of that call – to keep the channel open – alongside our awareness that we are sinners, trusting in God’s mercy: God’s infinite love, and mercy.

That was David. His whole life long, in his sinfulness, David kept the channel open. It would have been inconceivable to him to live any other way. God gives gifts uniquely to each of us. David understood, and honored, the gifts that God had given him, maybe as much as anyone who ever lived: honored them, and honored God, by using them, to his utmost. We can’t escape our sinfulness in this life; we can’t just shuck it off. But we can keep the channel open. We can honor the gifts God has given us – honor them by using them – and we can trust in God’s love and mercy to pull us through. Thanks be to God.