

Can't Apologize

Robert P. Hoch

First & Franklin Presbyterian Church
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Joel 2:23-32

²³O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the LORD your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before. ²⁴The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.

²⁵I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent against you.

²⁶You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you. And my people shall never again be put to shame. ²⁷You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel, and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame.

²⁸Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

³⁰I will show portents in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. ³¹The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. ³²Then everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved; for in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the LORD has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the LORD calls.

Luke 18:9-14

⁹Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Let's go back to the Pharisee. We may not like him as a person, but we value his values. They're good values. He's reliable. He pays the minister's salary, so I like him, for sure. He lives by a personal rule that we would approve of and maybe even appropriate for ourselves.

Let me go further and suggest that we would want him as our neighbor, living on our street. I feel like he would be someone I could count on. Trustworthy. If I was away, I know he'd keep an eye on the place. He's a good person, living a good life, a good life that hasn't been interrupted by any unpleasantness, which he keeps at arm's length.

Which is a clue to the problem: he is good, but he's self-made good. Kind of like the self-made millionaire. He believes his own gospel, feels as if he's the embodiment of his own message. Maybe that's the problem. As he speaks, he refers to the tax collector, who is at least in eyeshot if not in earshot of his own person. When this good person prays, he manages to mention himself five times in the space of two verses:

- I thank you
- I am not like others
- I make sacrifices
- I give generously
- My wealth

Who exactly is he praying to? Ostensibly, he's praying to God, but in truth he is praising the values of his good life, his self-contained, self-affirmed, self-propagating life.

A self-assured life that depends not on being merely good, but also needs a list of others he regards with contempt. You know, cheats, liars, gangsters . . . and then the quite real, physically nearby body of the tax collector, whom he refers to with a deprecating, “. . . or even like this tax collector.” He uses those characters, those types — which he has no place for in his life — as a measurement for the goodness he claims. But this is an irony: all of these people he speaks of, all of them, to a one, need God. Among other things, this suggests that Jesus isn't romanticizing the tax collector; he isn't the good-hearted mobster whose biggest sin is that he's misunderstood. He actually does bad things, really bad things. And by the same token, Jesus isn't saying that the good deeds of the Pharisee aren't in fact good deeds. He does good things, and they are really good things. Whether their deeds were good or bad, is just irrelevant to the story. Then what is the issue? What seems to be the issue is that the Pharisee not only has no need of God, he really has no need of his neighbor. To the extent that he relates to him at all, he relates to him through active contempt, or antipathy, anti-connection, revulsion.

I am not that . . . you feel it, almost visceral. “I am not a crook!” When someone says, I am not, your proverbial “[blank] detector” should be on.

Maybe it is also a sense of loss of empathetic connection between peoples and perhaps the loss of connection to our whole selves — we can't imagine ourselves as the thing we despise and the more the revulsion the more the distance. And therefore, we can't truly be ourselves, our real and complicated human selves. Perhaps that is the real burden of this text.

In some ways, Jesus' parable contributes to the problem because Jesus gives us two *caricatures* of people rather than the *characters* of people. There's a grain of truth to each picture. The caricature captures something true, like the street artists who make portraits of us (an artist's snapshot, exaggerating our huge ears, bulbous noses), and at the same time we want to flesh this thing out in real time, in character, with more nuance. And our parable teases us into this interpretation. In fact, at end of our text, Jesus says nothing about Pharisees or tax collectors, good or bad deeds. Instead, he speaks of *all people*: All people who humble themselves will be exalted and all people who exalt themselves will be humbled. As in, perhaps the real life of this text isn't in the black and white, the caricature, but in the grey areas of lived experience, in the character.

I'm not sure which struck me first, this text or a *Washington Post* story, but it doesn't matter. It's worth telling. John B. King Jr., formerly the education secretary for President Barak Obama, embarked on an amazing journey into his ancestral past. Look at his family tree and you'll see that John King descended from not just good people, but arguably great people. Lt. Col. Haldane King was a Tuskegee Airmen, the famed African American combat pilot group of the U.S. Army Air Corps. Haldane King's older brother William Dolly King was one of America's first black professional basketball players. John King Jr.'s brother served as Deputy Superintendent of New York's City Schools. Another family member served as a pilot of a refueling plane in Vietnam. His sister, Janis King Robinson, ran a North Carolina hospital. The list goes on.

Good people, great people.

And, included in this family tree, right at its base, are two enslaved people.

The King family knew they were descended from enslaved people but they didn't know much more than that. Maybe it was something about being called a slave. It's objectifying, reductive. As soon as you say, slave, the person disappears, the struggle, the story, the joy, the humanness. . . .

With the 400th anniversary of the birth America's slaving economy, John King Jr. has taken up the work of learning more about his ancestors. And in the process he discovered that they were subjugated in Gaithersburg, Maryland, at a farm just 20 odd miles from where he lives today. He learned that Lydia Hall King and Reason King, their forebearers, were enslaved by a person named Thomas Griffith. But they were in for an additional surprise: as they looked at the property records, they also discovered that the property was still co-owned by Griffith's direct descendants, two sisters, Amanda and Frances.

John King got the word out to the family. When King's sister, Janis (the retired hospital executive from North Carolina) heard about this, she decided it was time to visit this farm and these descendants of Griffith. Somebody said, "Shouldn't you call first? Make sure it's okay? Get permission?"

"No," she says, "we don't wait for permission. It'll be just fine."

So, one day, using her GPS, she turned up the gravel driveway, parking directly below the log cabin that would have been where her ancestors lived during slavery. It's long road back to that place . . . she had to catch her breath. Composed, she walked up the steps to the door and knocked. A few seconds later, Frances answered the door.

"My name is Janis King Robinson — I'm really sorry to interrupt your day, but we've been recently informed that our ancestors were enslaved here."

Interrupt her day, indeed! Frances had thought it was someone coming to ask about a 50-gallon water drum they were advertising on Craigslist. Although she knew her family had enslaved people, never in her life did she imagine she would meet, face-to-face, with one of their descendants. She was floored. She didn't shut the door. She didn't scuttle off like a frightened crab. She said, "Come on in."

They eventually took a tour of the farm. As Frances walks them around the farm, she keeps talking about where the *slaves* lived, where the *slaves* were buried, where the *slaves* . . .

"Please don't call them slaves," Janice says, interrupting. And gently as she can, she adds, "They were enslaved people, but they were not 'slaves.'"

Frances answers, "I'm a work in progress."

They continue walking. The log cabin is filled with tools and discarded furniture. Janice tells her that kind of bothers her, seeing as it was her ancestor's home. After that visit, Frances took out the junk. It had been a good storage space. But maybe the good was getting in the way of the important, urgent work of reconciliation. Now, when they walk past that log cabin, it's more like a memorial, more like a solemn remembrance, more like a prayer: *We will not forget . . .*

John King, who is a life-long eductoar, says that Amanda and Frances have been eager to learn through this process, which is not to say that it's been easy. King feels stories like this are important, for America, for our history. Frances and her sister Amanda are neither a stereotype of white racism, nor a stereotype of white goodness, but a complicated picture of a persons living with the legacy of whiteness, suddenly confronted with the problem of who they come from, becoming conscious of wounds inflicted but not healed, maybe not even acknowledged.

Janice King, looking back on that encounter, says Frances was about as human as anyone could be, which is telling. *Human*. You don't say that about a stereotype. You say that about a neighbor, a good neighbor. Janice King said her visit there was a "profoundly spiritual experience. I was doing exactly as I supposed to do."

The Spirit in Joel comes suddenly. Doesn't ask permission. The Spirit pours out on all flesh. Never notifies us ahead of time. Never segregates. Never red-lines districts, or favors the rich suburb over the poor ghetto. Never tells us quite where we're going, or crucially, with whom we are going. Slaves . . . or the enslaved, or their sons and daughters who carry within them the memory of slavery, testify.

Maybe slavers, or their sons and daughters, testify. *It's complicated.*

Amanda says that they didn't know what these African American people wanted. "We can't apologize to them," they said. "We didn't do it. And what would an apology mean to them? If we were to apologize to someone, we would have to apologize to their ancestors and we can't do that, can we?"

True, you can't apologize to the dead. But you can find the gravestone of *your* dead, of Thomas Griffith, the slaver. They took the Kings to see it: "In Memory of Thomas Griffith. Born 15th of Sept. 1803, Died 28th of January 1870." Engraved above was a weeping willow. They explain that the weeping willow means they lived a good life. They say they hold all veterans in high regard, including Confederate soldiers.

Still they wonder, why did he do it? Why did he enslave people? Then they walk over to what they called the "slave cemetery" — they used to play there as kids. It's overgrown with poison ivy and spindly oak trees.

"Where are the gravestones?" asks Janice. "Did you ever stumble over them when you played there?"

No, the family story is that one of their relatives threw the gravestones off a hill somewhere on the property. They'd just accepted that. Desecrated burial sites of enslaved people, normal for a "good" family. Or maybe not. They're asking questions. Among other things, they want to find those lost gravestones. It goes further. They always imagined that while all slavers were bad, Thomas Griffith was maybe one of the good slavers. They want to believe in American positive spin. Turns out, he was a Confederate sympathizer, who was ousted by Anne King, who at the time was just 15-years old, and also enslaved. Griffith was arrested and tried as a traitor here in Baltimore.

"We were just born here," say Frances and Amanda. "People ask us, 'What do they want? Do they want money?'" "No," she tells them. "They just want us to be careful with their history" (Ian Shapira, "Two Families, One Black, One White" in *The Washington Post* (23 October 2019). Be careful with our history. *Our* history. Black and white, and some grey too. Our history is perhaps not only a function of what historians write, but also a function of what we are prepared to learn from others. *The interruptions we are prepared to endure . . .*

Our last word this morning goes to a white rapper, whose son died recently. A white rapper is kind of an odd thing, maybe an interruption of some kind. Somewhere between a caricature and a character. But I think maybe he gets it. In one of his songs, in an album called, *Scars*, he raps:

"Life ain't got no sequel,
we all broken people —
the only road to found is lost."

Amen.

Sources Consulted

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