
Holy Erasure!

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Pentecost 12C

In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

In today's Psalm we hear one of the loveliest expressions in all of Holy Scripture:
Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other. (Ps. 85.1-2, 8, 10)

Many of us treasure it in our hearts and prayers. It's one of the most poetic verses in our Bible.
Mercy and truth have met together;
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

And speaking of poetic scriptures, we had a spectacle of "'poetic justice,' as they say, in our national experience last week. If you were following the news you may be able to guess where I'm heading in a few minutes. Even if you were on vacation you probably couldn't miss the drama of political fortunes and misfortunes careening back and forth.

On one side of the political spectrum there was a significant victory: the current administration of government in Washington scored a legislative success. Despite Republican resistance, the Democrats in Congress were able to meet the President's demand that we extend unemployment benefits to our out-of-work citizens.

On another front the week also began with a successful development from the political right. A conservative blogger representing the "'Tea Party' movement responded to charges of racism from the NAACP, which is the nation's oldest civil rights organization of African Americans. Going tit-for-tat, he effectively pressured the NAACP to admit to so-called "'reverse racism'"the claim that blacks also act-out prejudice against whites.

So, last week's "'culture wars' featured small victories at both ends of the political spectrum. However by the end of the week it was clear that those gains had been compromised by the "'Shirley Sherrod story.' I'll say more about the details of that story later. But first I want to share a couple of comic reflections.

The first involves event that occurred last week. On Saturday one of America's most respected journalists died, Daniel Schorr. Dan Schorr was 93 years old, having been born in 1917. He had become the "'grand old man' of U.S. journalism, serving in his field for some sixty years. As a reporter and correspondent he could remember Eisenhower and Stalin, he famously interviewed Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev, and his reporting on Watergate put him on the most resented list of President Nixon.

So venerable had he become, he told an interviewer once, that a junior reporter once rushed into his office and asked him what he knew from reporting on the Spanish-American War'"of 1898! It was only when the reported took in the expression on Dan Schorr's face that reality dawned on him enough to turn right around to leave the room, admitting, "I guess that was a little before your time."

The comic aspect of last week's developments can be described by that expression, "'snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.' The following joke also relates to last week, and can be filed under the category of just "'shooting yourself in the foot.'

The story goes that three types of characters were found guilty of certain charges. And all three were condemned to death by guillotine—that machine that executes people by means of a falling blade.

The first person to be put on the block was a clergy character, who stepped up with bowed head and waited for the blade to fall. The executioner pulled the rope but the blade got caught somehow and couldn't come down. The minister was euphoric and shouted characteristically, "God has decreed it! I'm innocent of the charges!" Then the minister was pardoned, set free, and went away rejoicing.

The second person put on the block was a lawyer. Again the rope failed to release the blade. Characteristically the lawyer announced that a condemned person can't be executed twice on the same charges; likewise was pardoned and also set free.

The third character put on the block was an engineer. The same thing happened: the executioner pulled the rope but the mechanism failed to work. Also characteristically the engineer looked up, pointed to the mechanism, and explained triumphantly, "I see the problem: the cable is getting hung-up right there, you just need to fix that and then it'll work just . . ."

Well, end of story—in more ways than one! Oh well; we're not always capable of enlightened self-interest! But now, how about last week's drama of similar dynamics? By the way, I apologize if you've heard "'enough already' of the Shirley Sherrod story from last week's ferocious news cycle. However I also promise to go beyond the news to our gospel "'good news' for today.

Consider that at the beginning of the week we were set up for a public spectacle; a political execution. By Monday evening Shirley Sherrod had been persuaded to resign her job for supposedly making racist remarks at an NAACP speech that she gave last spring.

Sherrod is an African American woman, and was a director for rural development here in Georgia under the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The charge of racism against her—or reverse racism—was based on a two-minute clip of her 40 minute speech to the NAACP in March of this year. In the clip she seemed to be boasting that she could have helped a white farmer save his farm, but that all she did was refer him to a white lawyer instead, particularly because the farmer spoke to her with a superior attitude.

However as the week unfolded the full speech was viewed by hundreds of people all over the country. (For an initial timeline of events see <http://mediamatters.org/research/201007220004> accessed by this author on 7/23/2010.) Then it became clear that the two-minute clip was taken out of context. In the full version of her speech, Ms. Sherrod acknowledges that she had some bias against whites because, tragically, during her childhood her father had been murdered by a white farmer in a hate crime for which he was never punished.

But then, remarkably, she goes on confess before her audience that it became clear to her that her prejudice was not acceptable; not professionally, and not morally or spiritually. As a public official she admits that it was wrong of her to seek to under-serve the white farmer. And as a person of faith she even declares that God revealed this to her through subsequent events.

In subsequent events she discovered that the white lawyer was failing to provide the legal aid that the farmer needed. So she felt morally and professionally obligated to intervene and insure that the family got to keep their farm. For that intervention she earned the enduring gratitude of the farmer, Roger Spooner, and the farmer's wife, Eloise Spooner. In an interview reported on Wednesday last week, 82-year-old Eloise Spooner told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that in fact Sherrod did save their farm and "kept us out of bankruptcy." (Read more at: www.newser.com/story/96019/farmers-wife-fired-usda-official-saved-us.html#ixzz0uVn6wuz accessed by this author on 7/23/2010.)

By the end of the week numerous apologies had been offered to Shirley Sherrod, from media reporters, to the NAACP, and even from President Obama in a carefully arranged phone call. Indeed the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture has now offered to reinstate her, albeit in a different job. And other commentators have noted that having so many people view the full video of Sherrod's speech is a good outcome of the story.

In that connection columnist Peggy Noonan, writing in Friday's Wall Street Journal, described Sherrod's story as

demonstrating "the power of grace and the possibility of redemption." Noonan even suggests that the video be assigned as "required viewing in the nation's high schools" when students return to campus this fall.

The rest of us can also learn from Sherrod's story, she observed; for example that "we're too quick to judge" and we're "not skeptical enough of what new media [sic.] Can cook up in its little devil's den." But Noonan seems especially eager to reach our nation's youth, perhaps in part because the video itself features Sherrod appealing to young people to go beyond the racism of their elders.

More substantively, however, Noonan calls this story a lesson in "'grace and redemption' because it teaches all of us that: "Individuals can change," she writes, "just like nations. They can get better, if they want to be . . . [This] can be a teachable moment," she concludes. (Read more at: <http://www.newser.com/story/96300/lets-teach-sherrods-speech-in-schools.html#ixzz0uW13jYNo> and at: http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703467304575383731552735178.html?mod=WSJ_Opinion_LEADTop#printMode accessed by this author on 7/23/10.)

And now for a gospel version of good news. The good news in Christ is that there are endless sources of "'grace and redemption' available to us whenever we "'ask, seek, and knock,' as today's gospel reading says (Luke 11.9). And as the epistle reading puts it, the good news in Christ is that a person can be "dead in trespasses"" as Shirley Sherrod confessed, dead in one's prejudices and unresolved grief and resentment over the bad things that have happened in your life"" and yet still, still we can "'ask, seek, and find' (Lk. 11.9); find a way to be "'made alive again' as both today's Psalm and the Epistle declare (Ps. 85.6; Col. 2.13). And what does the gospel prescribe for us who are dead in order that we may receive new life? Counter-intuitively, it is do what our Lord commanded in the Sermon on the Mount: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous . . . (Matthew 5.39-48)

Remarkably there is a kind of ju-jitsu or kung fu of the Spirit involved here. Like Shirley Sherrod, those of us who have tried this discover that as we give grace to those who trespass against us then we are restored to life. Remarkably, we discover that our trespasses no longer ensnare and dispirit us. Instead, as today's gospel reading says, we find that God is "'forgiving our sins for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us' (Lk. 11.4).

"'Holy erasure' is what we're talking about here; divine erasure of our trespasses against one another as one common people in this great land of ours. Elsewhere in his second letter to the Corinthians St. Paul declares that God was in Christ "'reconciling the world to himself . . . [by] not counting our trespasses against us' (2 Cor. 5.19).

But most majestically today's epistle declares that it is Christ himself who bears cosmic authority and power to annul our being "'dead in our trespasses.' Notice here the terms used in Colossians reading; terms like God "'making you alive with Christ by forgiving us all our trespasses;' and "'erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands;' and "'nailing it to the cross;' and finally "'disarming the rulers and authorities,' "'making a public example of them,' and "'triumphing over them in the cross' (Col. 2.13-15).

In this passage there's a hint of the theology that the Greek Orthodox tradition calls the "'fish hook' theory of the atonement of Christ. In this theory Christ performed a divine trick by permitting the Satanic powers, alongside this world's "rulers and authorities" to execute him. Precisely by executing him, this theology declares, those powers got more than they bargained for.

They thought they had entrapped and dispatched just another public victim in their mechanism of death and destruction. Instead they only served to bring into their domain "the author of life" itself, as the Acts of the Apostles calls Jesus in Acts chapter three (3.15).

Thus they brought the One who has the power of resurrection life into our domain of death and trespasses. In that domain we routinely betray, scapegoat, and trespass against one another. But Jesus' death and resurrection had cosmic power to erase or cancel out the multitude of charges and accusations that we accumulate every day and every hour. And thus he "'disarmed' the systems of hate and destruction, as Colossians exclaims, "'making a public example of them' and "'triumphing over them in the cross.'

I suggest that last week's public spectacle of the Sherrod story was a kind of social miniature of the cosmic drama depicted in Colossians; a micro-version of the infinitely larger triumph that the cross of Christ is effecting across all history and all cultures.

"The powers that be' were sure they had another victim in their maw. But her obedience to the law of love and forgiveness worked like a "Trojan horse' in the center of their camp. When out came the "soldiers of the cross' to her rescue, the powers were disarmed, exposed to shame, made to be "a public example," and forced to retreat to try again another day.

And now, in a few moments we will gather again before this altar and commit ourselves again to the same law of love and forgiveness. As we pray the prayer our Lord taught us in today's gospel reading, I invite us to be all the more intentional in our prayer today. And may God enable us all to experience divine "grace and redemption' as we seek to live the life of love and forgiveness that our Lord calls us to again this day.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.