

“Sex, Sin and the Birth of Jesus”

The only Vermonter to ever attain the White House, Calvin Coolidge was known as a man of few words. According to one account, the President attended a church service where the clergyman spoke on the topic of "sin." Asked to elaborate on the preacher's sermon, Coolidge replied laconically, "He was against it." The story would have been funnier, Coolidge later told a reporter, had it actually been true.

Unlike the preacher in that anecdote, I want to go on record in favor of sin, or at least declare myself a strong supporter of guilt. A Unitarian congregation in a certain mid-western state made headlines a few years back for the signboard in front of their church that proclaimed "We don't do guilt here." But suppose that church had been a courthouse, instead? I think guilt is a useful concept and often an appropriate emotion because the world as I see it is filled with perpetrators and victims, with the trusting and those who abuse that trust, with bullies and the criminally-minded and those they prey upon. Guilt is the moral category we assign to behavior that's hurtful or antisocial: lying, cheating, slandering, and other forms of malicious mischief. I have no problem calling purse snatchers or investment scammers who steal the pensions of little old ladies "sinners" or crooks or scoundrels. In my opinion, we should occasionally feel a sense of remorse for our actions, and I have no quarrel with the language of the traditional prayer book, "We have not done things we ought to have done, and have not done the things we ought."

But if I believe in guilt, I don't believe in shame, which is an entirely separate phenomenon. Guilt attaches to our actions, the things we do. But shame invades our identity, or who we are. The priest who molests a little boy may or may not suffer from any scruples of conscience, for example, but the child who's raped will almost certainly carry a crippling stigma of shame, a debilitating sense of being soiled or rendered abnormal or deviant from being an unwilling participant in an obscene act. I sincerely hope the guards at Abu Ghraib felt a twinge of guilt when their atrocities were exposed, for I'm sure the prisoners who were paraded like animals with dog collars and photographed nude in compromising poses nearly died of mortification—a word that interestingly comes from the root "mort," meaning "death." Shame kills. It represents an inward annihilation.

To speak more personally, I recall feeling guilty as a child when, in my one experiment with shoplifting, I was apprehended by the store owner and told never to come back to the premises. The pang of contrition at getting caught was a healthy and useful reaction, because I never stole again. On the other hand, I recall feeling terrible shame as a young child after my father died. When father-son picnics were announced at school, or I saw the other Dads coaching little league, I was liable get a lump in my throat, feel estranged like an outsider who could never really be part of the team. I was

ashamed to be different, less than, not good enough. And this was not a helpful emotion, but one that made me want to hide or disappear or sink into the ground. What I experienced was, again, a premature burial.

Now perhaps this minor confessional has made you think of times in your own life when you have also felt ashamed—the day when your parents disowned you because you were gay, or the semester you were held back a grade because you hadn't learned how to read, or how you felt after you lost your job, when you couldn't pay your rent. Shame burdens each of us in differing ways, arising from the psychic wounds and insults and indignities we all suffer in our vulnerability and brokenness. But its effect is always the same, chilling the joy of living.

But if shame is a powerful force today, it was even more potent in the ancient world, when modern ethical distinctions of right and wrong, vice and virtue, guilt and innocence, were secondary to Greco-Roman categories of honor and dishonor and to reigning Jewish constructs of purity and pollution. In that classical period when Jesus lived, whole classes of people were considered to be dirty and loathsome, filthy, not because of any wrong-doing on their part, not because they had "sinned" through any lapse in standards of character or conduct, but rather due to their social station or economic status or other externals. So, for instance, physical health and beauty were associated with honor and purity, but people who were maimed or disfigured or afflicted with disabling diseases or leprosy were considered to be low and degraded. Literally, such individuals were considered "untouchable," as is written in Leviticus: "The leper in whom the plague is ... he shall be defiled, he is unclean, he shall dwell alone, outside the camp shall his habitation be." Often the sufferers gathered in colonies, beyond the city gates, shunned by the better sort of citizen, giving a whole new depth of understanding to healing stories like the one recorded in Mark:

And there came a leper to him, beseeching him and kneeling down to him, and saying to him, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean. And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him ...

Did you notice? The man didn't ask to be cured, or healed of his disease, but rather to be made clean. The leprosy did get better, the story says, but the emphasis is less on a medical miracle than on a spiritual reality. Being "cleansed" I interpret not only in a ritual or ceremonial sense, but as a holistic response to the therapeutic power of touch and simple human contact. Imagine, a long lifetime of living among people who consider themselves your betters, who are physically repulsed by your very existence, when one of those strangers comes forward as a peer and reaches out his hand in support and comfort. The shame of being sick was lifted and dissolved because, as the story says,

Jesus was moved with compassion, which is a term that in both Hebrew and Aramaic is the plural of a noun that in its singular form is usually translated as "uterus" or "womb." So a mother feels compassion for the child stirring inside her that is the flesh of her flesh. A man responds with compassion to a brother or sister, because the two spring from the same womb. Thus when Jesus advises his listeners, "be compassionate as God is compassionate," he is saying that the greatest force in the universe is like a mother's love for her children, indiscriminate and unconditional, not favoring those who are especially gifted with good health or good looks or good fortune, but most of all concerned with those who are lost or struggling and alone.

Jesus challenged the social and religious caste system of his time, because he himself was born among the outcasts. Being rich didn't necessarily guarantee your purity or honor in that ancient Jewish world, but it didn't hurt, either, while being destitute was almost surely a sign of shame and defilement, if only because you lacked the money to buy sacrifices. And Jesus was undoubtedly poor, of doubtful parentage. Men and women had differing degrees of purity in that patriarchal culture, the natural bodily processes of childbirth and menstruation associated with uncleanness. But lowest of the low were those born out of wedlock, to illegitimate unions, the products of incest or adultery known in Jewish law as *mamzerim*. The orthodox weren't to marry such offspring, nor could *mamzers* inherit or hold public office. Bastards were commonly called "the excrement of the community." And it's liable that Jesus belonged to this despised, expendable class.

The earliest Christian writer, Paul, says little of his origins, except that Jesus was "born of woman," in the usual way, that is, and had a brother, James. In Mark, which is generally recognized as the earliest of the four gospels, probably written sometime shortly after the destruction of the Jewish temple in the year 70 C.E., there are no birth stories at all. Yet Mark does make one fascinating mention of Jesus' family, when the residents of Nazareth take offense at his teaching and ask, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" making for at least six siblings with no hint of a father. That's highly unusual for the period, when "Yeshua bar Yosef" would have been the ordinary way of referring to a young man Jesus whose male parent was Joseph. Mark never mentions any father figure, however, and later Jewish law would consider a man illegitimate who was called just "son of Mary," by only his mother's name.

It wasn't long after Jesus' death that the tiny Christian community centered in Jerusalem began to spread out to the corners of the Mediterranean, to Northern Africa and the Middle East. And the gospel accounts that emerged from that dispersion were influenced by the folklore of those regions, where deities born of virgins were familiar figures: there was Horus from Egypt, Attis from Phrygia, Adonis from Babylon, and Mithra from Persia, among others, all from maidens born. What was unusual and (to Gentile ears) slightly scandalous about the nativity legends was not that a man should be *divine* or have a miraculous birth attended by stars and portents (for most potentates in those days, from Alexander to Caesar, claimed some degree of godhood), but that *this man*—a nobody, an illiterate, impoverished peasant, a *mamzer*—should have such

a celestial genealogy. The later gospels do recall something of Jesus' dubious background. In the Magnificat, Luke speaks of Mary's "lowliness" or "low estate," a Greek word usually translated as "humiliation." But why Mary was "humiliated," suffered a loss of face or felt ashamed we can only speculate. Matthew says that her husband Joseph was minded to dissolve their betrothal and put her away privately, finding her pregnant before they had marital relations with each other. But both gospel writers, following the mythic pattern prevalent around the ancient Near East, insist that Jesus was born to a virgin, a claim that would have growing consequences for the church as sexuality, particular female sexuality, became associated with dark, infernal forces.

Illicit sex or transgressions like adultery might have carried a social stain in Judaism, but in a religion whose God commanded the Hebrews to "be fruitful and multiply," sex itself was never regarded as evil *per se*. So Paul, who was of course a Jew, testifies that his colleague the apostle Peter had a wife, as did other disciples, and Jesus himself is frequently called "rabbi" by the crowd at a time when being married was a normal requirement for the rabbinate. But gradually, the disciples came to be depicted as an all male band. Mary Magdalene, who was at the very least a close associate and devoted follower if not the wife of Jesus, was reduced to the role of a prostitute. The fact that Jesus had sisters and brothers or other normal family ties was quietly suppressed, for the virgin birth evolved into the dogma of Mary's perpetual virginity, then her own immaculate conception, finally her bodily assumption into heaven, until in our own time Pope John Paul II, the spiritual leader of one billion Roman Catholics around the planet, could proclaim that a man sins who lusts for his own wife.

Sex itself became a source of shame in Christianity. To engage in it for love, or joy, or pleasure, or for any reason except procreation, was deemed unholy. And the religion that Jesus lived and taught, the religion of compassion where love was likened to the womb of a woman, nurturing and embracing all her children, became a religion where only those who had no wombs were qualified to be priests or handle the instruments of salvation. A Christian morality of purity and pollution arose, a hundred times stricter than any practiced by the Pharisees of old.

And this is why it is important to me, especially at Christmas time, to separate the actual teachings of Jesus from the myths that rose up around him after his death. Jesus taught that sin is whatever separates us from our neighbor. Healing or salvation is whatever restores our sense of sacred self-worth as equal citizens within the Kingdom, enabling us to participate again in the mutuality of caring relationships. But the religion *of* Jesus is very different from the religion *about* Jesus, which has all too often been guilty of perpetrating contemporary caste systems: separating believers from non-believers, orthodox from heretic, engendering sexism and anti-Semitism, fostering homophobia and glorifying poverty rather than challenging the power inequities that create it. Were the historic Jesus alive today, he would condemn these social sins that, far more than fornication or sodomy or abortion, constitute the real offenses against human dignity, demeaning entire religions and whole races of people, tangling men in a warped sense of entitlement and trapping women in a false sense of

abnegation, separating us from nature and natural bodily instincts for intimacy and disrupting the actual unity the family of God.

So I will tell the stories of Bethlehem and Herod, of wise men and shepherds, because I enjoy these tales—I was raised with them and find them comforting--but at the same time feel compelled to criticize them and try to distinguish the chaff of fabrication from the grain of truth that they contain. Precisely because the myths are so enchanting, they need to be examined and unpacked. Call me old-fashioned, or call me scholarly. But it's the man behind the legends that I celebrate at this time of year, not a pre-existent Logos or disembodied Word, but a flesh-and-blood individual who was extraordinary not for the manner of his conception, but for his manner of living, whose teachings of radical compassion and unconditional co-humanity ring across the centuries like tidings of comfort and joy.

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