

Liberty in Forgiveness

Liberty is a book written by Garrison Keillor about Lake Wobegon's Fourth of July celebration. Clint Bunsen, a lifelong Lutheran and the auto mechanic at Bunsen Motors, was the chairperson of the 4th of July Committee.

Although Clint was sixty years old and appeared to be happily married, he had an affair for several months with the 28 year-old woman hired to play the Statue of Liberty in the parade.

Although Clint and the young woman would go out of town for their trysts, soon everyone in town knew what was going on, including Clint's wife. Of course, there was a number of touching yet humorous turns in the story before the affair ended and Clint and his wife reconciled. But what struck me about the *Liberty* was how Clint's secret sin was really not a secret at all in town, much like the way the author of Hebrews, in our second lesson today, says that God knows everything we do.

That lesson from Hebrews chapter 4 is a preacher's dream. It's only five verses and there is a clear distinction between law and gospel. The first two verses are absolutely stark, abject declarations of the Law. The law is God's command, a requirement we can never keep. Then the next three verses are pure gospel. The gospel is God's promise of salvation that frees us from the consequences we deserve for breaking His law. The gospel doesn't negate the law; the gospel pardons us although we are guilty.

Going in order, let's look at what the law has to say to us first. We are told that God is our judge and we must render an account to him. We have to answer for all our sins and transgressions. That should terrify us, and if it doesn't it terrify us it means that we are not taking God seriously enough. Every sermon should have a balance of law and gospel. If at some point in the sermon you don't feel guilty or offended because of the law, or don't start uncomfortably squirming before the threat of God's judgment, than I'm not preaching the law adequately. The law says that to speak ill of another is the same as murder. The law says to look at another person with lust is the same as adultery. If there is anyone among us today, who, by these standards, is not a sinner, please stand up... [I thought so.]

Even more terrifying is the fact that God knows all about us. Nothing is hidden from him. It's sort of like "Big Brother" in George Orwell's *1984*: God sees all and knows all. If we were not sinners, God's omniscience would not bother us so much. If we had nothing to hide, we wouldn't mind God searching us. Of course, many of us do feel as if we don't have anything to hide. It's not that we don't sin; it's just that we are often oblivious to our own sinning. We get lost in our own self-righteousness. We are very astute at picking out the sins and faults of others, but we can't see our sins, or we have lots of reasons why what may appear to be sin on us is not really sin at all. We can make excuses and rationales for anything!

I've been in the ministry long enough, twenty years now, that I'm not often surprised by the awful, hurtful things people say and do. I cannot say I've seen it all, but I've seen a lot. The evidence of human weakness and sordidness are all around us. But what is surprising is the fact that people

seem to think they can hide their sins, their gossiping and lying, without getting caught by other human beings, to say nothing of being caught by God. So many backstabbers are betrayed by the people they confided in; and so many people that are plotting some dastardly scheme accidentally expose their own evil plans. There is poetic justice, and perhaps divine justice, in that. But justice is not what we want. Justice would not be pleasant for us at all. What we want is mercy, God's mercy.

One might think that God has no idea how difficult it is to be a human being. We might think that God has it pretty easy living up there in heaven as he does as opposed to us living down here on earth in this rotten flesh. But, in fact, God knows all about being human. Not only did God create human beings, He was and is one in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus, God incarnate, knew every temptation we know. He felt everything we feel. He desired everything we desire. Only he did not sin. He passed the test. He withstood the temptation. We might think we are too weak to withstand temptation. We might think that we are slaves to our flesh. On our own we are, but with God all things are possible.

God grants us mercy. For the sake of the innocent sufferings and death of Jesus His Son, God the Father grants us pardon and release through the power of God the Spirit. That's the gospel portion of our text. We'll say more about this in a minute. But first, let us consider that God not only can grant us forgiveness after the fact, after our evil deed is done, He is also there for us to give us grace at the point of attack. God's grace can help keep us from sinning in the first place. Not only does God pardon us, He also assists us to amend our lives so that we do not continue in our sins.

God is ready, willing, and able to lift us out of the “muck and mire” that our sin has created. Licentiousness and lawlessness are not what Christian liberty is about. True Christian liberty is reconciliation with God and His intentions for us.

So let’s live this gospel statement out. We’ll do something a little different and unique in the sermon today, and that’s all right because God is still speaking to us – he’s saying the same things He has always said about law and gospel, but He’s no doubt still speaking loud and clear.

Jesus tells us that if we have something against a brother we should leave our gift at the altar and go be reconciled to him before offering our sacrifice. In a round about way that also means that before we come to Holy Communion we should get our sins off our chest and be at peace with one another, forgiving one another. So pick up your Lutheran Book of Worship, the Green Book, in your pew rack, and I am going to lead you through a modified form of *Corporate Confession and Forgiveness*, which begins on page 193 in the front of your LBW. Anyone who is sinless is excused from this exercise, but if you’re a wicked sinner like me you better participate so that you receive the Holy Communion to your benefit and salvation, rather than to your judgment and condemnation. We begin on page 193...

P In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C Amen.

P Father of mercies and God of all consolation, come to the aid of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Give us the power of

your Holy Spirit that we may attend to your Word, confess our sins, receive your forgiveness, and grow into the fullness of your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and our Redeemer.

C Amen

P Let us make confession to God.

C Almighty God, merciful Father:

I, a troubled and penitent sinner, confess to you

all my sins and iniquities with which I have offended you
and for which I justly deserve your punishment.

But I am sorry for them, and repent of them,

and pray for your boundless mercy.

For the sake of the suffering and death of your Son, Jesus Christ,

be gracious and merciful to me, a poor sinful being;

forgive my sins,

give me your Holy Spirit for the amendment of my sinful life,

and bring me to life everlasting. Amen

P Almighty God in his mercy has given his Son to die for us and, for his

sake, forgives us all our sins. Through his Holy Spirit he cleanses us and

gives us power to proclaim the mighty deeds of God who called us out of

darkness into the splendor of his light. As a called and ordained minister of
the Church of Christ and by his authority, I therefore declare to you, who are

truly, repentant the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the

Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.