

Speechless

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When I was a boy I used to spend hours and hours throwing a rubber coated hardball against the side of our garage. It was a brick garage and it was a perfect place to practice the fielding of groundballs. When I was young I played shortstop and that was a great way to practice. My dad used to warn me of the window that was right next to the place where I threw that rubber coated hardball and suggested that I best think of another place. And because we lived in the church manse (my father being a pastor) he was always doubly worried about what his boys might do to the house because he would have to bring such damages to the Board of Trustees. Many times my father asked me not to throw the ball in such a precarious place. But often when he was not around, I did. Well, sure enough, one Sunday after church before dad came home, a throw to the side of the garage went errant and found the window. Crash. You know the feeling in the stomach of a boy who has done something like that. And you know how I felt as I sat on the front step waiting for my dad to come home to tell him the news. You know the tremble in my hand as he walked up the sidewalk. You know the cringe on my forehead as I told him the story. You know, because you've been there. You have been in those moments when there is this big question in your mind as to what is going to happen when this person who is supposed to love me – learns a truth about me. What is going to happen when this person who is supposed to love me – learns a truth about me? You can imagine my surprise when after getting myself into a big lather - my father said, "Well son, it happens in the best of families." Never was I so relieved. Of course, the next sentence out of his mouth was

that's going to cost a bunch of weeks of allowance. What is going to happen when this person who is supposed to love me learns a truth about me?

Back in my student ministry days I once worked with a student who had run away from home. I will give his name as Chris. Chris had made a few bad choices and his parents had done their best to love him through those bad choices with some balance of law and grace. But in high school the balance of parental law and grace is always up for interpretation and debate. So finally Chris decided to run away. He ran away so he could live life on his own terms. And after a few months of living life on his own terms it got kind of old – but then came the question could he go back? What would happen if I go back? How would these people who were supposed to love me – what would they do with this truth about me? He told me of nights he would drive by his house and see the front porch light on and how every night he would go by it would never fail to be on. 11pm it was on. 2 am it was on. 5am it was on. The whole street was dark except for the light in front of his house. He never remembered his parents leaving that light on before he ran away. And how after a time it dawned on him that that was the sign – the sign that said it was the time to learn what these people who were supposed to love him – would do with a son who had run away from them.

That is so much the journey of life isn't it? This discovery of what love is? This discovery of how far love will go? For these people who are supposed to love me – what will they do when they learn the truth about me?

And so Jesus tells the story about the two sons. Two sons who are not quite sure of the love of their father. They don't quite know how far the father will go with his "unconditional" love. One of the boys, the younger, is anxious to test it. He decides to claim his inheritance early – take the family money and run away. "Let's see how dad handles that," he says. And the father gives him the money and lets him go. The other stays home with the chores and the three square meals. And so there comes the time when for the younger boy when the money runs out and the options close –

and he decides that it's time to head home and see if the front porch light is on. And he's ready with his statement – a statement that tells his father that it's all right not to treat him as a son. It's all right not to love him. It's all right just to hire him as a slave. He is afraid now to learn how far the love of the father will go.

We know the story – the boy makes his way home and not only is the front porch light on – but there is his father bounding down the street toward him. “Father,” he says, “You can't love me this much! I have a statement to make. It's all right not to treat me as a son. It's all right not to love me.” But before he can continue the father wraps him in a bear hug and says – I know the truth. I know the truth. And I still love you. And out comes the robe and the ring and fatted calf and the band and the party because for the father the greatest truth he knows about the boy ... is that he is his son. No other truth trumps that. He is his son.

“What about me?” the older son asks. “Because the truth about me is that I would have loved the fatted calf too, you know. I've got a little resentment about junior here, you know. I wished I could have a little walk on the wild side, you know.” And the father says, “I know. I know. I know. Nevertheless, all I have is yours.”

Unconditional love may be one of the hardest things for us human beings to understand. Because the truth is so much of the love we experience in this world – is conditional love. Love with strings attached. Love with a few question marks. Love with some lingering doubts. What will this person who is supposed to love me – what will they do when they find out the truth about me? The truth is broken windows and runaway sons – are not always met with gracious responses. Unconditional love may be one of the hardest things for us human beings to understand.

We've talked before about Victor Hugo's great story *Les Miserables* when the ex-convict, Jean Valjean, after having been shunned at every doorstep finally knocks on the door of a compassionate bishop who welcomes him in and serves him a feast with his best silver. And in the middle of the night – the hardened ex-con rises and returns the favor by stealing the silver and running away. Hours later

after being caught by the police he is returned to the bishop for identification – and the bishop who, by title, is “supposed” to love him, having learned the truth about him, says that not only had he given the silver to Valjean, but that he had forgotten the candlesticks. His grace, later he tells Valjean, was meant to purchase his soul. We all know that part of the story.

But what we may not remember is that after such an act of grace – Jean Valjean makes his way into the countryside and because he cannot quite grasp what has just happened – he sees a boy playing with what would be for us a couple of quarters and what does he do? He instinctively steals them. He has been given the silver – but he steals the quarters. He cannot grasp the truth of what has happened and who he really is. That he has been graced and that he is a graced human being.

So when we get to that part of the Creed when we say of Jesus that he was crucified, dead and buried it would only be human of us to not fully grasp what we are saying. We have said it enough times perhaps not to allow the words to penetrate our souls. To not be startled by the non sequitur of our creedal statement. Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate – and – was crucified, dead and buried. What was that we said? That this Word made flesh – this incarnate God – was tortured, killed and buried? What is this all about?

And it is about, of course, the mission of Christ. And the mission of Christ is about putting an end to the question. To put an end to the question that we human beings have about the nature of the Father’s love. What will this God who is supposed to love me – what will this God do when he learns the truth about me? Well, of course, he’s always known the truth about you --- he knows about the silver, he knows about the broken window, he knows that you’ve run away to the far country – he knows all that – and yet somehow there is a truth he knows about even more – the truth about you being a daughter, the truth about you being a son. That’s the truth about you that trumps all the other truths and that the man on the cross is there to put an end to the question about how far God will go to reveal his love for you. About how unconditional unconditional is.

Nothing on our part need be said. No statements need to be prepared. No speeches of disclaimer offered. It is finished, Jesus says. Accomplished. Completed. "Father forgive them for they don't know what they are doing," he says to those who have conspired against him. And he doesn't wait around for their response. It is just so. It is just so. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them." Whatever battle we thought we still had to fight, whatever speeches we thought we still had to make. All that is over. It is finished.

Hiroo Onoda died last month. You may remember Hiroo Onoda or read his obituary. Hiroo Onoda was the Japanese soldier who fought for the Imperial Army of Japan in World War II in the Philippines and when the war was over no one told him. No one told him that he didn't have to fight anymore. No one told him the battle was over. So Hiroo Onoda kept fighting and hiding and fighting and hiding. It wasn't until 1974 – 29 years after the end of World War II – that they finally got to Hiroo to tell him that the battle was over. Unconditional surrender had been given 30 years before. Peace had been established. Reconciliation had occurred. But in all that time Hiroo had been fighting and sadly, 30 Filipinos had died as a result of his continued battle after the end of the war.

Don't you wonder what life might be like if we could simply grasp how unconditional unconditional is? That whatever the truth is about us – we don't have to battle anymore for the love of the God who is supposed to love us? We truly have been reconciled. End of question.

Frederick Buechner put it this way:

"People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in the field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan

it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the Lamb...”

Don't you wonder what might happen inside of us if somehow the unconditional love of God penetrated our souls and awakened us to be truly his children? New creations, Paul said. Why we would be new creations. The past finished and gone. Everything fresh and new. Free finally to live this incredible life of grace for the sake of those who do not yet know that the battle is over. To keep the porch light on. To welcome home the runaways. To feast together with the finest silver. That we can say to all the sons and daughters – it happens in the best of families. Why to imagine such a life ... is to leave yourself speechless.