

Releasing the Captives
Part 4: The Strongest Wall is the Self
Text: Ephesians 1:20-23
Preached by Bruce D. Ervin
16 May 2010

For nearly 50 years some of the best theology available to the public could be found...in the comics; specifically, in a comic strip called *Peanuts*. Sometimes the theology was worked out in the interplay between the resident saint and the resident sinner. The saint's name was Linus. The sinner's name was Lucy.

Lucy once said: "Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do." Lucy lives by only two rules. Rule # 1: I am always right. Rule # 2: When in doubt, refer to rule # 1. Lucy is the caricature of all of the self-righteous people you ever knew. Or maybe, Lucy is the caricature of you, and me.

I suppose that we all have a streak of self-righteousness in us. And that may not be a bad thing. If you didn't have moments when you thought that you were right and everyone else was wrong, you might not be able to take action in tough situations. Tevya, the father in the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, makes his decisions by first weighing his options. He says, "On the one hand..." it might be like this but "on the other hand..." it might be like that. But if you just keep going back and forth saying, "On the one hand...on the other hand," then you'll never make up your mind and you'll never do anything. At one point Tevya says, "There *is* no other hand!" And that's when he boldly sets his course, absolutely sure that he's doing the right thing. He's right, and everyone else is wrong, and he's going to do what he's got to do.

That's essentially what it means to be self-righteous: you're right, and everyone who disagrees with you is wrong. Not only that you're right, but you feel so very proud of yourself because you're right, and so superior to all who disagree with you. And sometimes you have to be like that in order to get anything done. The trouble is, sometimes even in those situations, *you're wrong*. And it's very hard for some of us to *admit* that we're wrong. Everyone else has a problem; not me. Perhaps all people at some point delude themselves into thinking that. "Those of you who think you know it all are bothering those of us who really do."

Sometimes we're wrong. St. Paul put it this way: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). And you know, that's okay; as long as we can admit it once and a while. Because, you see, if you never admit that you're wrong, then you can't receive forgiveness. To be sure, God forgives you. No matter how bad your mistake; no matter how wrong you were, God forgives you. But you have to *admit* your mistake in order to *receive* that forgiveness. I can offer you a glass of water. But you have to admit that you're thirsty before you'll *receive* that glass of water, and drink it, and feel the wonderful sensation of

cool, clear water going down a parched throat. It works the same way with forgiveness. God has long since forgiven you for every mistake that you've made, for every act of harm that you've ever done, for every time that you insisted that you were right when in fact you weren't, for every time that you were right, but you felt so inordinately proud and superior about it. You're forgiven. It's over and done with. You can let it go and move on. But in order to *experience* that wonderful sensation of letting it go, you have to admit that you made a mistake.

The strongest wall in the prison of sin is the self. If you're going to break out of that prison, you have to be humble enough to admit that you're not perfect. Think of some of the other walls of that prison. You can forgive those who've sinned against you (that's the second wall), you can address the sins of the world (that's the third wall), and that's good and important work. But if you don't recognize *your* need for forgiveness – if you self-righteously refuse to admit that *you've* made mistakes – then those two keystone walls (your own need for forgiveness and your refusal to admit that need) those keystone walls will not topple and they'll continue to buttress the other two, and you'll be trapped in that prison for the rest of your life.

Reinhold Niebuhr said that it's always easier to repent for someone *else's* sins. Another wise person said, "Every time you point a finger at someone, there are four more pointing back at you." So any preacher who's going to talk about self-righteousness must do so from a standpoint of confession. There have been times in my life when I've been *very* self-righteous. In my first church, nearly 30 years ago, a parishioner accused me of being a very arrogant young man. And you know what? He was right. The only comfort that I could find in that moment was the fact that he was even more arrogant than I was!

There is certainly a self-righteous streak in me. I came of age politically during the 1960's. It was the era of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. As we marched in the streets with our placards that said, "Freedom Now," or "Stop the War Now," we *knew* we were right. And if you disagreed with me you were an ignorant redneck. During the early and mid '60's lots of self-righteous activists from northern cities like Chicago went south to demonstrate against racial injustice in places like Selma, Alabama. I was too young to go, but people from my church went there. They knew they were right. Maybe it didn't occur to them, though, that there were plenty of troubles in their *own* city that they ought to address. All these Chicagoans were going south to work for civil rights and meanwhile Dr. Martin Luther King said, "The most racially segregated city in the nation is Chicago." Niebuhr was right: It's easier to repent for someone else's sins.

In the summer of 1964 three young men who'd gone south to work for civil rights were murdered. Killed by some White men who feared the loss of their position of privilege over Black folks. A White Baptist preacher named Will Campbell felt their loss deeply. He was a southerner who was working for civil rights in his own backyard. In his book *Brother to a Dragon Fly*, Campbell describes a painful scene in which his alcoholic brother who despised religion

tries to exploit Campbell's grief for his own self-righteous ends. They're riding in a pick-up truck and they're talking about the murder of the three civil rights workers and the alcoholic brother says, "Where's your God of love and justice now? How can you believe in a God who'd allow such murders to happen? I want you to explain to me in 10 words why you're still a believer."

And Will Campbell said, "We're all bastards; God loves us anyway."

We seek a false sense of security by trying to prove ourselves right. We seek a false sense of security by trying to prove ourselves superior to others. But if the security of self which we seek is found *within* the self, then our search will be in vain. That's like a drowning person trying to save himself or herself by clinging to a flimsy piece of wood. It might work in the short term, but if you're going to be *really* secure you need to somehow get to shore. And the shore which we seek is God. The security which we seek is the God revealed in Christ Jesus, and not we ourselves. As the old hymn says: "On Christ the solid rock I stand. All other ground is sinking sand." Finding solace in one's self-righteousness is but a quick fix. The only real solution is to find solace in God and in *God's* righteousness. The only real solution is to find comfort in God's grace; in God's unconditional love for you, not matter how wrong you sometimes are. Only God is always wise, always right and always in charge.

I have good news for you: you don't have to be right all the time, because God is. You don't have to be the Saviour of the world or the Saviour of this church or the Saviour of your family, because the job of Saviour is already taken. I don't care how wise or virtuous you think you are, you have not been given the job of Saviour. Jesus Christ is the Saviour of the world; Jesus Christ is the Saviour and the Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22).

This is the truth behind Luke's story of the Ascension; when the Risen Christ was carried up into heaven (see Luke 24:50-53). It's one of those stories in the Bible where, if you worry too much about whether or not it really happened, you'll miss the point. In the mindset of the pre-modern world, those with authority were high and lifted up. Kings sat on high thrones; the gods lived atop the mountains; sermons were preached from high pulpits. To be high and lifted up meant that you had authority. So if the Bible is going to underscore that Jesus has authority, where's it going to put him? High up in the heavens; seated on the right hand of God. You can't get much higher than that. Whatever you believe really happened on Ascension Day – 40 days after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter morn – whatever you believe really happened, the point of the story is this: Jesus Christ is Lord! Not you, not the person next to you, not even the Church Council. Although the Church Council does have authority over you and the person next to you, there is One who has authority over the Church Council, over The United Church of Canada, over the nation and indeed over the whole world. That one is Jesus Christ. We are called to draw upon *his* wisdom, *his* authority, *his* righteousness; and not our own.

We spoke last week of Mahatma Gandhi; one of the wisest and most humble men in history. That humility came at a great price. He had to struggle

for years with his own self-righteousness before he found his way to the still waters of humility. We see that struggle in one scene in the movie *Gandhi*. He has just started an experiment in communal living called an ashram and he's moved his family to this commune where everyone has a job to do, no matter how menial that job may seem. One of those jobs is cleaning out the latrines; cleaning out the pit toilets. Guess who got that job? In the movie, Gandhi gives it to his wife. In his self-righteousness he insists that she must clean the latrines; in her arrogant sense of privilege she refuses. So he tries to kick her out of the community. In a burst of anger he is literally shoving his wife out of the ashram. And then in tears he says, "What am I doing?!" He apologizes for trying to throw her out. And she, also close to tears, humbly says that she will clean the latrines.

Gandhi, of course, practiced the Indian custom of greeting people by joining hands together and bowing a little. This great man would've greeted you by holding his hands together and bowing. And then, again following Indian custom, he might've invited you into his very humble home and offered you a cup of tea.

For our brothers and sisters in India, to bring one's hands together in greeting is to symbolize the coming together of two souls: not one soul superior to the other, but two souls coming together as equals; as one. And we are equals because God dwells equally within us. The hands symbolize the coming together of two souls, and the bow says, "I bow in deep respect to the all-loving, all-powerful and omnipresent Lord who dwells within you."

I want to thank Pamela and Sameer Sen for sharing with me these reflections on humility in Indian culture.

Will Campbell said that we're all bastards; but we must not be complete bastards because God has chosen to dwell within each of us and all of us. We're a bit like Linus and Lucy together in one person. We're kind of like James Cagney and Pat O'Brien in that old movie, *Angels with Dirty Faces*. Having dirty faces, we dare not put too much confidence in our own righteousness and wisdom. But when we admit to our own moral arrogance, and repent of that, and seek forgiveness for that, then the grace of God washes over us like cool clear water, washing away those dirty faces and revealing the better angels of our nature. Amen.