

# “It’s a Wonderful Thing”

(the nonviolent nature of genuine guilt)

6th After Epiphany, February 16, 2020

I'd like to say a few words about — *that wonderful thing* — called **guilt**.

**“Wonderful?”** you might say.....

To call guilt "wonderful" may not ring true to you. It may sound very strange, even absurd, or somehow "masochistic." When we hear the word, "guilt," the feelings & meanings that often just 'come up' are of a "trip" to a state that is very dark, oppressive, perhaps even "spooky" – a state that makes us anxious & depressed.

*But that is something else.* Some like to call it "shame," some by other names, but I prefer to just call it "*something else*." Something not good, not helpful. Something with no redeeming value. Something we know when we experience it. And, tragically, in the history of the Church, the word "guilt" has often been made to carry the dark & disturbing meanings of that "*something else*." In fact, many people never "*darken the door*" of a church for fear of being yanked into that unwholesome state.

But that state is not "guilt" — at least not in the best, Christian, sense of the word. So, in that best (and I believe true) sense: What **is** guilt? Where does it **come from**? What does it **do** within us? And **why**?

It's actually simple (not simplistic, but simple.) It comes down to this: **Genuine guilt is born of genuine love.** Without love, *there is no guilt.* Without love, there may be that dark & disruptive "*something else*," which leads us into anxiety & despair (*and all the harmful things they can lead to.*) But there is no guilt.

Genuine guilt only arises in the light of genuine love. The love that is pure gift, given freely — not out of *obligation*, or because it's been "*bribed*," or because it's "*on the rebound*," or because it fancies us to be something that we're not. So it's a love that doesn't avoid us, or withdraw from us, or diminish — when certain conditions are not met. And — very importantly — it's a love that is for **us**, but it's not "*all about us*." It's a love that enables & inspires us to, in some way, *genuinely love back*.

Guilt only arises when we've experienced this ourselves — when we **know** deep within that we are genuinely loved, and are enabled to love back.... **but we haven't.** That awareness, that recognition, is guilt. So very unlike that morbid, debilitating, finger-wagging "*something else*"... **guilt** is empowered by **love**. The **light** guilt shines into our lives is the light of genuine love.

And it's **very** enlightening. It reveals not just the loveless acts we've outwardly committed, but the harmful, loveless desires beneath them, which set those acts into motion. Guilt doesn't stop when we say, "*Well, that wasn't my intention...*" — **if** — *hidden away at a deeper level — it actually was, and perhaps still is, our intention.* To the light of genuine love "*all hearts are open, all desires known, and no secrets are hid.*" It's not that "cotton candy" kind of love, which "*wouldn't dream for the life of it*" to ruffle our feathers.

Guilt reveals. But everything it reveals — is revealed in the context, in the ambience — of genuine love. And so, guilt is *sorrowful*, but not depressive. Guilt is *sobering*, but there is no fear or anxiety in it. Guilt is *humbling* — it brings down our arrogance *like a house-of-cards* — but there is no violence in it; it doesn't lead to self-degradation or abuse. Guilt is a vulnerable place to be, to be sure, but it's a place that's *safe* to be vulnerable in.

Because, within guilt, we encounter the love that dissolves our fears — the love that safely contains, and atones for, our sins (even “a multitude” of them) — the love that heals the wounds & repairs the damage done to **us** by our loveless deeds & desires. It's deeply curative, not just a facelift. And (*fortunately for the world around us*) guilt doesn't stop with helping us alone. It empowers & calls us to help repair the harm we have done to others. Even if they themselves are too hurt & angry with us to want our help, there are always plenty of other, less direct ways, for us to make helpful reparations. And guilt's work is not done until we make those reparations. So it stays with us until we do, until we don't need it any more.

((This is not the sort of teaching that St. Paul, in this morning's epistle, called “*milk*,” for spiritual “*infants*,” who still need to be prevented from sticking paper clips into wall sockets. It's more “*adult*” food. And so, it's more *subtle*. We can't just go out and do it. It needs to be “*inwardly digested*” as the older prayer book says.))

In this morning's gospel, it's hard to not get distracted by the **style of speaking** Jesus uses to **grab** the attention of his disciples — like the black-and-white contrasts between chastity & adultery — and the “over-the-top” *hyperbole* about cutting off your hand if you catch it sinning. It wasn't that the disciples were “*a tough crowd*,” but that they were quite “*stuck*” in certain harmful ways of understanding themselves — and needed to be “*shaken up*” by a bit of drama, in order to realize that.

But beneath the drama, the essential problem Jesus is revealing is that **his disciples are experiencing no genuine guilt** — no inner process where the light of God's Love reveals & transforms all that is loveless in them, down to the deepest, hidden desires of their hearts. Instead, they're experiencing “*something else*,” something that darkens and leaves them ignorant of both the Heart of God and what's actually going on inside of them (*... and something that, by the way, the corrupt among the Pharisees & Scribes were actively fostering in their harmful ministries.*)

We don't hear how the disciples responded to this teaching of Jesus. Surely they'd be full of questions about how to move “out” of their morbid preoccupations and “in” to this new, redemptive, life-giving “guilt” that Jesus seemed to know all about.

But, by now, they likely already knew that the best answer (*to such pressing questions*) lied in Jesus' very first words to them: “*follow me.*” For how **else** could they develop a capacity for genuine guilt, if not through experiencing first-hand what genuine love is like — by relating with Jesus — more & more deeply — day after day?

I pray God will use these few words — about what guilt is, and what it is not -- to inspire you. Especially since time is quickly passing, and we'll soon be in the penitential season of Lent (*which isn't meant to be like doing 'hard time' in a penitentiary!*)

I hope you'll remember that genuine guilt is good; that it only arises out of genuine love. And that it plays an important role in becoming more genuinely loving ourselves. It even... takes “*the sting*” out of death. It really **is** a wonderful thing.

So don't settle for “something else” — something less good, less benevolent — than genuine guilt. Accept no imitations.

The best way to insure that you get “*the real thing*” is to practice surrendering your life **only to the God who is Love**, not to any lesser, unholy god..... And to enjoy real friendships with others who are growing to actively, genuinely love, as Christ loves them..... And to joyfully pass it on & on..... Amen.