

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke

Part 1: Jesus: Savior, Sinner, or Both?

Countryside Community Church
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Scripture: Luke 3:1-10,15-18, 21-13; Hebrews 4:12-16

It's so wonderful to be back at Countryside again, after four weeks of crisscrossing the country to spread the message of how gifts may be found deep in life's Dark Wood! While the book tour was energizing and the enthusiastic response from the public was deeply encouraging, I was quite ready last week to be home and into the thick of things here. Yet while I started back to work on Monday, I had to turn around and leave town again on Friday – this time for Memphis – to attend the memorial service of a beloved friend and mentor who has also spoken at Countryside numerous times through the Center for Faith Studies and Darkwood Brew: Phyllis Tickle. Phyllis, whose maiden name I discovered to my surprise was Phyllis Porter (the same as my mother!), died on September 22, at age 81.

As the founding Religion Editor at *Publisher's Weekly*, the leading journal of the book trade, Phyllis spent the first half of her career reviewing books on religion and spirituality, and the second half writing the very kind of books she used to review. As her *NY Times* obituary stated, Phyllis was “a leading voice in the amorphous but evolving Emergence Christianity movement which rejects the hierarchies and many of the orthodoxies of the past and predicts a convergence of the various strands of Christianity, each of which had historically gone its own way.” (In other words, Phyllis approached her faith differently than James Bond did his martinis: she liked things both shaken *and* stirred. That's what many of us loved about her.)

Ironically, however, when it came to her death, Phyllis chose to embrace a form of worship that is about as hierarchical and orthodox as Protestant worship can be: a “Requiem Eucharist” service at St. Mary's Episcopal Cathedral following the old Episcopal “Rite I” liturgical form (“Rite I” is even “higher church” than the more common “Rite II” service). As a family member told me, Phyllis said she wanted to be laid to rest “by a man wearing a dress.”

The climax of the service – as at all Episcopal services – was the partaking of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. Before Communion began, participants prepared themselves by “passing the peace,” in which the celebrant announced, “The peace of the Lord be always with you,” and the congregation responded, “And with thy spirit.” Then, we turned to each other, shaking hands and asking, “May the peace of Christ be with you.”

As we passed the peace, I was surprised to see a friend of mine leave her pew and cross to the opposite side of the sanctuary to pass the peace to another friend. What made this gesture surprising was not the length of the traverse but the fact that, as far as I'm aware, these two have not spoken to one another for the better part of a year after a major disagreement ruptured their relationship.

I thought to myself, "How wonderful! They both know that Phyllis loved each of them wholeheartedly, and here at her memorial service they're honoring Phyllis in the best way they know how. They may not have reason (yet) to love each other, but they love Phyllis and respect her decision to love each of them. And that's enough for now.

Ironically, this simple, beautiful gesture I witnessed between two estranged friends reminded me of one of the greatest pieces of wisdom I have found in the Qur'an. You've heard this story before:

According to the Qur'an, when God created human beings, God commanded the host of heaven to bow down to us. At first, the angels objected, as they could see clearly that humanity was flawed. "They will commit evil," the angels exclaimed, "even murder!" In response, God said, "I know things that you do not." That stopped their complaining. While they could see no reason to bow down to humanity using their own wisdom, they respected God's wisdom and choice to create us. Therefore, they honored God by bowing.

Only Satan, known as Iblis in the Qur'an, refused to bow to humanity. He was a perfectionist! He pointed out, quite rightly, that he was made of far higher quality material than we were (smokeless fire as opposed to mere clay). How could he, as a higher-order being of greater perfection, ever bow to lowly humanity? Since Satan did not honor what he could not understand – namely, God's choice to create us as imperfect beings, nor God's love for us – he was kicked out of heaven. (This story is recounted in bits and pieces in seven places: *Al-Baqarah* 2.28, *Al-A`Rāf* 7.11, *Al-Hijr* 15.29, *Al-Isrā`* 17.61, *Al-Kahf* 18.50, *Tā' Hā'* 20.116, and *Al-Qasas* 28.71)

In this story, I believe the Qur'an is identifying one of the greatest sources of evil in our world: *self-righteous indignation* (even self-righteous indignation that accurately perceives the flaws of another).

I watched from a distance in St. Mary's Episcopal Church while my two estranged friends honored Phyllis Tickle by passing the peace of Christ to each other. I was reminded not only of this Islamic myth, but also of a claim made by the Gospel of Luke: Namely, that Jesus was a sinner like us, even as God singled him out at his baptism as "my Son, the Beloved," with whom God was 'well pleased.'

Most Christians reject this idea of Jesus being simultaneously the Beloved of God and a sinner out of hand. Yet when John the Baptist baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, Luke tells us that this baptism was for “repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” (Luke 3: 3). A plain reading of the scripture clearly indicates that Jesus was a repentant sinner. Yet this reading is highly offensive to many Christians who insist that Jesus can be savior, or sinner, but not both. Therefore, they tend to claim either that Luke was mistaken, or more often, that what Luke really *meant* to say is that Jesus was baptized for the forgiveness of *our* sins, not his own. Many cite Hebrews 2:15 to buttress their argument, which claims that Jesus was “tested as we are, yet without sin.”

Personally, I don't feel qualified to assess whether Jesus ever sinned or not, and I'm not sure that anyone else is, either. After all, over the course of history, many of us have considered certain acts to be sinful that we later discovered to be innocent (e.g., homosexuality), while other actions that we considered innocent were later shown to be sinful (e.g., the subjugation of women).

Yet I find myself drawn to the idea that Jesus could be God's Beloved even as a sinner like every other human being who has ever lived. As far as I can tell, being “fully human,” as orthodox Christianity claims Jesus was – in every respect except for sin – sets Jesus a long way off from being *fully* human. Yet even the most orthodox Christian agrees that Jesus cannot be our savior if he was not fully human. While it may seem counterintuitive, I trust Jesus – and God – a lot more if being “fully human” includes the propensity to sin. Why?

First, because I distrust the basic impulse that leads people to insist, as Satan did in the Qur'an, that anyone worth bowing down to as God's beloved must be perfect. Given that we human beings are far more imperfect than the host of heaven, we have even less reason than Satan did to insist on perfection as a prerequisite for obeisance!

Second, whatever Jesus' actual state of being may have been, one thing I know for sure is that I am a sinner. And I hate my sin. I hate my sin so much, in fact, that it takes tremendous effort not to allow my hatred of sin cross over into self-hatred – especially since I believe that God hates sin more than I do. My natural inclination, therefore, when it comes to God, is to resist any kind of relationship. I erect barriers, set up roadblocks, and do most anything in my power to keep God from drawing too close. Given the opportunity, I will even go so far as to cast blame on God, insisting that it's God who doesn't want relationship on account of my sin, not me. Yes, even as a Christian minister I do this.

If the only way that God can love me, or want relationship with me, is for Jesus to be without sin, taking on the punishment that God intended for me upon himself as an innocent victim of God's wrath, this only confirms the judgment and self-hatred that I have already come up with on my own. Only, I feel more guilty and

worthless than before. As if my sin weren't bad enough, now I've made someone else suffer for sin that I should rightfully be punished for!

Yet if God proclaimed Jesus to be God's "beloved" as a fully-human sinner like you and me, then the moment I actually believe Jesus was beloved is the moment he saves me – saves me not from God's judgment and condemnation but from my own. For if God loves a sinner as extravagantly as God loved Jesus – even going so far as to raise him from the dead – then how can I go on hating myself for my propensity to sin – or you for yours?

Instead, I find myself jumping at any opportunity at all to be in deeper relationship with God. I will not hesitate because my deepest yearning is to be in relationship with God. "You have made us for yourself, O Lord," writes Augustine, "and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you." (Confessions i.1) Jesus the sinner-savior clears the way to find just this kind of rest.

As I witnessed my two estranged friends honoring Phyllis Tickle last Friday by passing the peace of Christ to each other even before they had worked out their issues, I believe that they honored God even more fully than Phyllis. For they showed that, as deep as the divide between them may be, it is not deeper than their desire to act toward each other in the same way God acts toward us all. While Phyllis may have desired to be laid to rest "by a man wearing a dress," I think that what brought rest to her soul as much as anything else in the service was this simple act of grace.

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(Turn this "final word" upside down for the full message.)