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“The Restoration of Innocence”

This past Easter morning at 4:00 a.m. we were celebrating the Easter Vigil in the monastery where I live. At one moment early on in the liturgy I was stunned, quite unexpectedly. I had a kind of epiphany, something which has very much stayed with me during these past months. The monastery chapel was still in darkness, illuminated only by lighted tapers held by the monks and a large number of people worshipping with us and the great Paschal Candle. In this darkened space tears rolled off my chin. The tears started in the course of the deacon’s singing the *Exsultet*, this ancient hymn proclaiming the Easter light of Christ.¹ One phrase in the *Exsultet* stunned me, made me tremble a bit, and then came the tears. The phrase was this: “How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. **It restores innocence to the fallen....**” Innocence. Christ’s offering us not just forgiveness, not just redemption of what is wasted or lost, but innocence. If Jesus, knowing you even better than you know yourself, were to say to you, “You are innocent,” could you take it in? “You are innocent.” Could you begin to imagine being innocent? “You are innocent.” This is not about being “declared innocent,” like a verdict rendered in a court of law. This is not the *adjudication* of innocence but rather the *restoration* of innocence. *That’s* the context in which we hear these words sung in the *Exsultet*. Our being made innocent again by Christ.

The English word “innocence” comes from Old French, borrowed from the Latin, and at its core it means “not guilty, simple, pure, blameless,” words that are sometimes hard to come by for me and, I suspect, perhaps for some of you, too: not guilty, simple, pure, blameless. Innocence. We cannot *not* know the truth we know about ourselves and about others. We cannot *not* know what we have learned in life, in the best of times and the worst of times. So what would this “restoration of innocence” that Christ promises us look like? Innocence: to be not guilty, simple, pure, blameless. I’d like to suggest two ways to claim the restoration of innocence by Christ: first, with our own selves, and then with others... and then a postscript.

I’ll tell you, please, a bit of my own story, which may parallel some of your life’s journey in the church. When I began the ordination process, I had a pretty clear sense of what I would be given, were I to be ordained. I had been blessed to witness and experience the ministry of a number of ordained ministers. I saw what they did, what they said, where they went, and how, and I recognized their transformative influence on so many needy people, me among them. Their ministry was a gift, and I longed (and thought I needed!) to be ordained to offer *my own* life to God, much the same. I had a clear sense of what I would be given in ordination; it had not occurred to me what I would lose if I set off on this path. One of the things I lost was innocence.

It happened very early on in seminary. A wonderful group of seminarians... except for those who weren’t. I was so deeply disappointed, even scandalized, by what I saw and heard in some of my fellow seminarians... and I found myself sort of re-writing church history in my own mind... because it dawned on me that *this* was the way it probably always had been. The church, full of very inadequate people. It’s like the light came on with St. Augustine’s teaching about the efficacy of the sacraments regardless of the worthiness of the minister. “I got it!” amidst my disappointment about my fellow seminarians... and also the clergy, whom I was seeing through

new eyes. And then there was the Bible, what the Hebrew and Greek actually said, which wasn't always what I wanted it to say.... I soon discovered that this thing called "systematic theology," was an affront to my personal patchwork of piety. I wanted everything to stay nice and neat, and on my own theological terms. I remember one of my seminary classmates saying to me one day in the course of an earnest discussion we were having about something in church history or the Bible or theology. My classmate said to me, "Curtis, what are you pretending not to know?" Which was very insulting and very insightful. The biggest pretending, and the biggest pretense was myself, I came to realize. How I had prided myself in my single-minded devotion to Christ, and my spiritual disciplines, and my deep yearning for holiness. Some days I felt like being very holy; some days I was an absolute fraud. I was no better than the next. And it just killed me to admit it.

R. S. Thomas, the great Welsh poet, writes of "the wound of knowledge." Quite. As we grow up we learn more and more about life, what was before, and what is now, and what will likely come to be in the future. The wound of knowledge. What to do about this wound of knowledge about our own selves? You will know these wonderful words of Saint Paul, recorded in the First Letter to the Corinthians (the 13th chapter): "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put to an end childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."ⁱⁱ God knew. God knows. God knows what you now know, what you have come to know. We all have been "hidden under the shadow of God's wings," to quote the psalmist. God has known all along. And as for you: What drew you to Holy Orders? What you were back then – *what* you were, and *how* you were, and *where* you were, however you had become the way you were *then* – God knew, and God attracted, like with bread crumbs, to lead you and lure you into this household where you belong.

In the Incarnation we experience God's coming to us in Jesus, stooping low to meet us on our own plane. What we have come to know, in the fullness of time, God has known all along, and known all along *about us*. In the fullness of time, God is sharing that knowledge with us, the knowledge about our own selves with us. The French theologian Paul Riccoeur writes about a "second naiveté." I think this begins with our own selves, as we come to know – know life, know ourselves – as God has known all along. Let the nature of that knowledge dawn on you. Jesus says, "I have come to make all things new," including for you a new heart, and new eyes, and a new mind to apprehend your own self... you, whom God has known since you were knit together in your mother's womb. And so, I want to say this coming to know – and some days, coming to know things which you might rather *not* know or admit about your own self, or about life – your coming to know... needs not be a desecration but rather an emancipation. "The truth shall set you free," Jesus says. What you now know is what God has known all along. Now God has opened God's own heart to you. We read in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (from the 14th century): "Strain every nerve in every possible way to know and experience yourself as you truly are. It will not be long, I suspect, before you have a real knowledge and experience of God as God is."ⁱⁱⁱ I would call this the road toward the restoration of innocence – coming to know as we have been known – in our relationship with our own selves and in our relationship to God.

The road toward the restoration of innocence – coming to know as we have been known – in our relationship with our own selves and in our relationship to God, is equally true in our relationship and our ministry to others. I would suspect that most all of us have had the experience of having quite a negative impression of someone. And then there comes the occa-

sion to learn something more about them... maybe by observing them or learning something about them. It's as if cataracts have been removed from the eyes of your heart.^{iv}

A couple of weeks ago I was at a reception, a rather formal affair for rather proper adults... except for one child whom I certainly did not invite. This was a four year old boy, running all over the place, yelling and spilling and bumping. I found the little hellion incredibly annoying, almost as annoying as his mother, with whom I happen to be speaking, and who seemed oblivious to her problem child. She finally excused herself from me, turned to the boy, called him by name and asked him to come to her. The little boy stood across the room, hands fold, mouth smug, indignant and resistant like only a four year old can be. The mother called him again by name and bent down... to give him a spanking, clearly needed. Except she didn't spank him. The little boy came to her, and instead of spanking him she lifted him up into her arms and laid his head on her shoulder, cuddling him, and he became still almost immediately, his eyes closed. The mother said to me, "he missed his nap, and he missed his supper, and he misses his daddy who is traveling overseas... and here I am dragging him out to this reception." I experienced a conversion almost immediately. My disdain was resolved into compassion and admiration (for mother *and* child) and I found myself asking the mother, quite spontaneously, "What could I do to help?" And I ended up carrying this precious child to the car while the mother gathered her things.

I think this same experience can happen to us when we have the honor listen to someone tell us something of their life story. And in the knowing, you come to see them differently. You are now seeing more, more deeply into this person, with the penetrating eyes of Christ. You may discover that what had first appeared to your eyes as a stain on this person's character is, in actuality, not a stain but rather a scar that they bear, and perhaps bear well, bear miraculously well, given all the givens they've been handed in their life. We may find within ourselves, quite unexpectedly, a kindness, a sense of tender loving mercy, *hesed*, the restoration of innocence, in our relationship to others. If what we know about another person does not leave us with a sense of tender loving mercy for the person, we probably don't know enough about them.

What is your mindset as you look on other people? What is your mindset toward others – people who are standing next to you in a store's check-out line, someone sitting before you in a parish pew, your neighbor, a co-worker, a fellow volunteer on a committee, one of your sister or brother clergy who is here? What is your mindset toward other people? What's your "default"? One of the earliest things we learn in life is how we are different from others. We are younger or older; taller or shorter; left handed or right handed; male or female. We are more or less beautiful, or charming, or eloquent, or successful, or wealthy, or educated, or devout, or whatever. If left unattended, our life's mindset toward other people will focus on our differences, how we are *not* like this other person. The restoration of innocence invites the opposite. The restoration of innocence in our relationship to others is the movement away from a judgmental separation from others, to compassion for others, to identification with others. It's the conversion of our critical faculties to a judgment of love. I'm not talking about "going native" and becoming naïve in our relationship to others. Here's what I mean about a judgment of love.

In our baptismal promises, we commit "to respect the dignity of every human being."^v The problem is, so many people do not have a sense of dignity to respect. (It should have been handed to them as a birthright, but for many people, it wasn't.) And so many people other

people have lost the dignity they had... and they will never find it alone. They would not know where even to begin to search. They may even collude with their loss of dignity by doing or saying very unacceptable things, because that's what they think they're supposed to do. That's what they've been taught. It's very unacceptable, but, believe it or not, they are doing the very best they can.

I'm mindful of a story Anne Lamott tells about Tom Weston, a Roman Catholic priest. Father Weston has what he calls the "Five Rules of the World," rules that many people are taught, beginning in childhood. "The first rule, he says, is that you must not have anything wrong with you or anything different. The second rule is that if you do have something wrong with you, you must get over it as soon as possible. The third rule is that if you can't get over it, you must pretend you have. The fourth rule is that if you can't even pretend you have, you shouldn't show up. You should stay home, because it's hard for everyone else to have you around. And the fifth rule is that if you are going to insist on showing up, you should at least have the decency to feel ashamed."^{vi}

And a lot of people do. They are ashamed of their lives, and show it consistently in their speech and their deportment. I would say that here is a two-fold invitation for us in the restoration of innocence. First, for ourselves, to change our own mindset, our own default in how we look on others. I would suggest this: to pre-judge others with a presumption of love, that what they are saying, how they are acting, what they are doing is the best they can right now. Our role is not to incarcerate them by our own disdainful judgment (a judgment which they may be only too willing to confirm). Our role is not to incarcerate them but to liberate them. To participate in the emancipation that Jesus empowers us to share: "to bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound."

A man came to see me not long ago and was complaining about one of his colleagues, whom I know. This person said to me, "I can't work with him. He's an idiot. Do you know what I mean?" I said to this man with whom I was speaking that I thought he could only claim half of what he said. I told him I thought it was appropriate, maybe necessary, to determine that he couldn't work with this colleague... but that he could not call this person an idiot. I said, "He's a child of God... and if you lay claim on this word "idiot," *both* of you will lose your dignity." (Holding on to disdain towards someone imprisons both of you. Remember, in a prison, both the prisoner *and* the prison guard are locked.)

Here's the two-fold invitation: to co-operate with Christ in this restoration of innocence in our own lives and as an agency of Christ in others' lives. Do you know the experience in the Sacrament of Reconciliation – your own experience or the experience you witness in others – when the penitent rises to their feet following the absolution, they are a new person, set free. Life is full of confessions, day-in and day-out. Most people, most of the time, are making a confession about their life, whether or not they are consciously aware. Liberate, don't incarcerate. Don't collude with their shame, their sense of inadequacy, their off-putting attempts for inappropriate attention. Don't collude. This is a child of God, as worthy and needing of God's love as you are. The restoration of innocence in our relationship to others is the movement away from a judgmental separation from others, to compassion for others, to identification with others. It's the conversion of our critical faculties to a judgment of love. Liberate, don't incarcerate, which is to co-operate with God in the restoration of innocence.

Here's a final thought: about how holy water may help in the restoration of innocence. I think that often times the truth has to be washed. Not washed away but washed clean before it can be fully received and freely lived. For the truth which you know about another person to be washed. I heard one of my brothers in the monastery say recently that he felt he was so full of sin. (He wasn't talking about *his own* sin – there's plenty of stuff there in his own life, he acknowledges. Conversion, he knows, as we know, is life long. But he wasn't talking about being full of *his own* sin.) He said he was “so full of sin” because of *other* people, other people's sin: what he had heard and seen and come to know. He said he understood more deeply than ever how one could be a carrier of dis-ease, other people's dis-ease, and other people's sin... and he deeply and desperately needed to be washed free, washed clean.

As ministers of the gospel we open ourselves to the messiness of other people's lives. And many people's lives *are* a mess... which is why they're so desperate to be saved, to be saved by Jesus, and why they show up on our doorsteps. The issue here, for me, is not the fact that we come in contact with the carnage of people's lives, with their very soiled histories... The issue here is what we do with what we know. I'll use here a medical analogy. The reason why a nurse or doctor carefully washes their hands as they move from patient to patient is for two reasons. For one, so that they do not, unwittingly, become of carrier of dis-ease from one person to another. The other reason for the hand washing is so that they themselves do not become infected with others' disease. There's a very fine line between *affected* by someone and being *infected* by someone.

In the monastery where I live, we have holy water stupes placed at the entry points to our chapel, which may also be true for some of you in your churches or oratories or quiet sanctuaries. Use the holy water. Avail yourself of this grace. Keep baptismal water within reach. Touch it; wash your hands with it; wash your ears or your eyes... which have taken in the debris of someone's life. And use sacramental sign of holy water as an aid to your prayer: your prayer for some soul who has made themselves vulnerable to you, and in prayer for yourself, you who have opened your own heart to their distress. For the truth to be washed.

Some of us here may need to pray for this cleansing and practice this washing almost endlessly, given the work we've been asked to do in this season of our life. This may actually be a way for us to “pray without ceasing,” (to paraphrase St. Paul), for the washing of the truth.

ⁱ The text for the ancient *Exsultet* is found in the *Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 286-287.

ⁱⁱ 1Corinthians 13:11-13.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, from the 14th century.

^{iv} “The eyes of your heart be enlightened,” a phrase from Ephesians 1:18.

^v *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 305.

^{vi} Anne Lamott (1993), p. 100.