

- 1) Last week, since *it* had stopped spewing,
the story of *oil pipe* in the Gulf got upstaged by the story of a *different* kind of spewing.
The impact of the more recent spew was less graphic, its toxicity more subtle.
Like the gusher in the Gulf, this one, too, has now been capped for the time being—
but the underlying issues, in both cases, are as much in play as ever.
- 2) When the story broke last week, it seemed to be about racism in reverse.
The face and voice of Shirley Sherrod were clearly there for all to see.
A black woman, apparently resentment driven,
dragging her feet at helping a poor white couple. *Outrageous! Disgraceful!*
And then it came to light that her remarks were “quoted out of context.”
That line is often a lead-in to self-exonerating qualifications, made up after the fact.
In this case, however, “quoted out of context” meant
that what had whirled around the internet and news media wasn’t the full or the real story—
In its fuller telling, the story eventually revealed that Ms. Sherrod’s remarks
meant exactly the *opposite* of the offensive way in which they had been construed.
 - Reticence to help a poor white family, it turned out,
was an understandable impulse that Shirley Sherrod had recognized and resisted—
was working tirelessly *against*, and *warning about* in the much-quoted speech.
 - And *that* turned out to be *itself* only part of a larger story still—a story including
 - The murder of her father by a white man that a white jury let off scott free.
 - The blocking, by the government, of loans for a coop farm that
would have helped her community use its own resources to combat poverty.As all now admit, there’s blame aplenty to be ascribed in all directions—save her own.
As she quietly said in an interview, we do need to have a national conversation about race.
We also need one on the news media—and the internet—and partisan political practices.
The quick consensus among media watchers, however is that nothing will change.
The “gotcha” momentum is beyond control. The needed conversations will not happen.
- 3) Not surprising, really. Conversations like that are easier to *call for* than to *have*.
Case in point: if the authors of this morning’s scripture lessons were religion writers,
and I were their editor, I would probably do a Secretary Vilsak on them all:
I want your resignations NOW.
As President Obama said of BP’s Tony Hayward: *They wouldn’t be working for me.*
Did you hear what each one of them just said? *Outrageous! Disgraceful!*
 - PAUL (or whoever’s writing in his name) compares baptism to circumcision.
(*At so many levels that’s just so wrong!*)
As if that weren’t bad enough, he compares what Jesus does on the cross
to what conquering military commanders used to do with prisoners of war—
drag them back home, and parade them naked for everyone to jeer at.
I ask you: what God of peace and love would do a thing like that?
PAUL, YOU’RE FIRED!
 - LUKE—he takes the Lord’s Prayer we all know and love;
he strips away the lovely lyrical liturgical cadences,
and reduces it to a few power point bullet points—
What a tin ear! Sacrilegious, if you ask me.

Even worse—he pictures prayer as a pesky banging on the door
of a lazy God who seems to begrudge giving up his beauty sleep.
Why should we pray? —

Luke’s answer seems to be: “The squeaky wheel gets the grease!”
Pull over to the side of the road, Luke,
and type out “OKAY, I’LL QUIT on your Blackberry!”

- HOSEA —The nerve of this guy!

He has the audacity to claim that a pure and holy God has told him to marry a prostitute!
(Amazing what some people think God tells them!)

And really now! What kind of dad would saddle his kids
with names like “*Not Pitied,*” and “*Not My People*”?

Imagine what they will have to put up with on the grade school playground!

He’s turned these *poor* little children into *poster* children for divine rejection.
Enough already! Turn in your badge, Hosea! Clean out your desk!
Security guards will escort you from the building!

- But what if it’s even worse?

The Word of the Lord/The Gospel of the Lord we responded after each one had their say.

They’re just mid-level religious press writers, these three;
the boss they work for is lots bigger than me.

If they, in fact, do accurately represent the One they claim to work for,
the responsibility goes all the way up the chain of command.

The one who needs to be fired here is GOD. (Do you want to tell him, or shall I?)

- 3) As I said, it’s easier to call for a hard-but-needed conversation than it is to have one.

Easier to make knee jerk responses to video clip snatches,

then to invest the time and patience needed to listen for the fuller story.

But what if—like the well-snipped statements of Shirley Sherrod—

these segments I’ve snatched from Paul, Luke, and Hosea

convey exactly the *opposite* impression of the wider story each is trying to tell?

If that were so, apologies would be in order, to say the least.

More to the point, we might *miss* the larger story—

a story, without which our own stories are increasingly vulnerable to media snippetry.

Truth be told, we haven’t time to hear the full stories that Paul, Luke, and Hosea are telling—

let alone the whole story God may want to tell.

But at least we can get a perspective that is wider and deeper

than the one I just gave you—a perspective that stops at the end of my nose.

Getting a bigger, truer picture of Shirley Sherrod didn’t require hours or days.

A few broad glimpses were all it took to expose the false impression.

So let’s try that out with Luke, with Paul, and with Hosea.

- 4) PAUL: On circumcision and enemy shaming

- As circumcision was in ancient Israel, baptism, says Paul, is a mark of identification—
of being unconditionally included in a community created
by God’s free and generous covenant love.
- Paul then goes on to note a long list of human self help schemes
that those to whom he writes are using as fruitless attempts
to bargain with God—in order to get what God has already given them for free.
- Your self help spiritual climbing plans are not freedom, Paul says;
they are incarceration—slavery—bondage.

In the cross of Christ, God does a costly war of liberation
against those insidious forces that really do need exposing and shaming.
Bottom Line: *I'll draw whatever picture gets your attention*, the Pauline author says,
to show you that God really does want to reach out to you and set you free.
(Not all that unlike what Shirley Sherrod has been trying to do in Georgia for years.)

5) LUKE: On prayer as squeaking the wheel to get some grease.

- In the villages of Luke's day, all you could bake at a time was your "daily bread."
If a guest showed up late at night, and you were out,
there were 7/11 stores to which you could run out and get some more.
If a guest showed up, hospitality was expected, no matter what the hour.
And it was also expected that, at any hour,
if you had to go begging bread from your neighbors in order to feed them,
the neighbors would readily comply—or be seriously shamed if they didn't.
Not to get up and give bread? Absolutely unthinkable—it would never happen!
And as for gifts given to children, while a parent in that day would not indulge children,
neither would they poison them—
children were needed for work so the family could survive.
- Luke's Jesus is drawing a cartoon depicting an absurd *impossibility*
In the world as you know it, he says, friends and parents NEVER act this way.
And if *they* wouldn't, God *most certainly* doesn't.
Prayer is not like an insider trading scheme
the success of which measured by big instant payoff.
As the work of those like Shirley Sherrod demonstrates,
bringing in the reign of God is a long, slow haul—
but it's not a hopeless enterprise—God is in there pitching too.
- Bottom Line: *I'll draw whatever picture gets your attention*, Luke says, *to show you
that God wants you involved in the work of reaching out to folks and setting them free.*
So ask, seek, knock, bang on the door as hard as you can.
You may not see, every day of the week, what God is doing about the world's injustice,
but this for sure: God isn't in bed snuggled under the covers, fast asleep.
Just don't give up, whatever you do. (Shirley Sherrod certainly hasn't.)

6) HOSEA: On marrying a prostitute, and turning his kids into poster children

- Conspicuous by its absence in this story
is any account of how Gomer ended up the way she did.
She could have been a victim of widely practiced
temple fertility rituals that easily got way out of hand.
But: Did you notice? God does not condemn Gomer.
God just tells Hosea to marry her.
to love her, to give her children, and in the process of those relationships,
not to deny, but to name the hopeless tragic social slavery
that Israel's children have allowed themselves to be seduced into.
But God still asks Hosea to love those children, just the same—
love those who have made themselves *not God's people* back into *being God's people*
- Bottom Line: *I'll draw whatever picture I have to, no matter how unseemly*, Hosea says,
to get you not to criticize injustice from a distance, but to put yourself in the thick of it,
right where you can't help but suffer the effects of the very diseases
that you and God are working to cure.

(In other words, to name again the obvious, to do what folks like Shirley Sherrod do, even if that entails, as it often will, being persecuted for righteousness sake.)

7) The Lord's Prayer, as we traditionally say it, is lovely of course.

So much so that it can easily sound in our ears like a soothing lullaby.

But Luke's Jesus wants to teach us a different way of praying:

Bullet points for bottom line behavior—

- 1) Honor God alone as the ultimate authority and value.
- 2) Give everything you've got to building the Commonwealth of God
- 3) Ask for what you need—no more—
and insist on the same for all your fellow creatures.
- 4) Plead for release from all that enslaves you,
and turn loose of the ways in which you tie others down.
- 5) Constantly seek discerning guidance so that, in this commitment,
you don't get paralyzed by distractions, or get caught up in distortions.

For Jesus, as Luke sees him,

The Lord's prayer is a compass for getting through tortuous terrain,
a North star for negotiating troubled waters on a dangerous journey
a battle plan for waging peaceful freedom
all the way from here to God's Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

8) In a back story interview, the NY Times writer who did the initial story on Shirley Sherrod was asked if Ms. Sherrod was likely to accept an offer to return to the USDA.

The writer answered, "I doubt it is likely, there's a book deal in this."

In her own interview with NBC's Chuck Todd,

Ms. Sherrod evidenced nothing nearly so opportunistic.

Instead, she showed a calm, clear, centered alertness to a different opportunity:

"Wherever I'm needed, that's where I need to be—that's where I want to be," she said.

Conversations that come forth from a stance like that *have* been—*will* be—costly.

God grant us—grant me—patience, clarity, tenacity, and courage

to see God's fuller story, to stand within it, share it,
and for work for it as Shirley Sherrod has done.