

Reversals: LMF, September 3, 2006

[Luke 18:9 – 14]

*Introduction*

This New Testament text seems at first glance to have a straightforward moral lesson about the virtues of religious humility over against arrogance about right standing before God. It is so framed by Luke. One commentator says that the picture itself – the story – should be looked at and not just St. Luke’s frame.

As I understand it, the text before us is about reversals. I want to talk about reversals of self-perceptions of spirituality.

I want us to look again at this parable through the medium of a novel.

*The Novel*

Andy is protagonist of a coming-of-age novel entitled *Chrysalis Crucible*. It is the story of a young evangelist who goes off to West Berlin in the early seventies during the Vietnam War to win converts door-to-door and on the streets, like Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. He starts out quite cock sure of his abilities to wrestle anyone to the ground of belief in Jesus. The novel deals throughout with the theme of tested faith. Another theme is violence and non-violence with a related subtheme of hell. There is finally a sexuality theme. Lots more “seasoning” gets thrown into the 527-page stew.

Early in the novel, Andy is caught out by the Director, “G. E.”, at their agency headquarters: Gospel Outreach – GO. The Director happens upon Andy in a spontaneous stand-up wrestling match with a gorgeous Texan, Fiona, while they are practising their door-to-door evangelistic skills near Chicago. The Director takes a very dim view indeed. We read:

There was a note the next morning in Andy’s mailbox at the Administration Building. It was not from Fiona.

“Dear Andy:

*Can you please come up to my office right after classes end this morning?*

*Joyfully in Christ*

*G. E. Moore”*

This was Andy’s second time visiting G. E., who seemed so elusive.

“Hi Andy,” the voice said, “come on in.”

Andy noticed more this time: the expensive office furniture; a bay window with padded bench and reading lamp. From that vantage point, Andy could guess, one could see just about the entire *GO* campus. Three books lay on the bench, one open, pencils nearby. I'll bet he spends hours right there, Andy felt envious.

There was a family photo. He recognized Dan in it right away, *GO*'s groundskeeper, handyman, and housemate to Jack and Andy.

A fireplace and mantelpiece were tucked into a squared corner. *Gemütlich* was the German word: cozy. A warm comfortableness pervaded.

The office had a feel of organized busyness. That was its own intimidation to Andy who felt lazy just standing there.

"Andy," G. E. began, "I wanted to talk to you a bit about how things are going at the Centre. I trust you've settled in pretty well by now?" As in the first meeting in his office, Andy, remembering, felt being "sized up" by G. E. Something about how his eyes moved.

Andy nodded affirmatively, adding: "I've loved the first month, Mr. Moore!" Buoyed with the day's experience, Andy felt even a little of Jack's exuberance when in reply.

"My son's music has not been too loud?," G. E. continued.

"If he's listening to music, Mr. Moore, it must be through ear phones. I haven't heard a note.

"Oh, he listens to music alright..." But Mr. Moore's comment went no further. "I trust you're getting along fine?"

"If you mean with Dan and Jack, yes sir! For that matter with everyone else in our house, and at the Centre."

"How about with Fiona?," the question caught him off guard like a sucker punch. He remembered: that car! He was instantly wary.

There was again a searching. Andy distinctly disliked G. E.'s probing eyes; this fattening up for the kill.

"I hardly know her. But she's my new doors partner. I like her," was straightforward and enough.

"Andy," he now braced for it, "I sometimes drive around just to see you guys in action. I saw you and Fiona 'in action' alright, but it wasn't exactly what I'd expected..." Those eyes, what is it?

Andy hadn't noticed before the clock on the mantelpiece over the fireplace. In the silence, it seemed to keep time with each of Andy's thoughts, turning over deliberately like a slot machine...

At last: “Andy, what do you have to say for yourself? I hold you personally responsible.”

“With due respect, sir, for what?,” Andy said evenly.

Instant flash of anger: “Are you denying that you and Fiona were embracing in plain view today?!”

Andy felt hurt. He had had immense respect for G. E. from everything he knew about him. “Mr. Moore, like I said, I hardly know Fiona! We’ve not talked to each other much since I arrived. Like everybody, I find her... really attractive. And today. Well, we were fooling around, if you saw us in that car that drove by? I remember now. She was kidding me about something, and... Well, I took it upon myself to... put a stop to it by pinning her arms down from behind. It lasted all of a minute. Wouldn’t you know you’d drive by just then! Honestly, that’s all there was to it. You could ask her.”

There was another long pause. Then, “Andy, we have to be so pure here. You know the warning about the devil going about like a roaring lion. You’ll never see my wife and I even holding hands on campus for the same reason.”

...

“So I implore you as a Christian brother, but then command you as one responsible for your soul, you must not be touching people of the opposite sex here at *GO*, period!”

Andy knew he had not read that in any of *GO*’s promotional literature, nor seen it in any other fine print. Yet here it was by overt oral fiat. Here he was. What to say? He thought of Jack, how this would curb his style totally.

“Mr. Moore, I came to *GO* with every intention of obeying the rules. I honestly did not know yesterday I was breaking any. I take full responsibility for what happened, what you saw. I’m the one who grabbed hold of Fiona. I’m sorry.

“I can assure you, it will not happen again. I came here to serve the Lord, not just my whims.” He stopped.

Again those uncomfortable eyes.

Then, “Andy, it’s not easy sitting where I do. While I have others helping, I take personal responsibility for the care of each of your souls. I sit here every morning, overlooking the grounds, and pray for you all by name.

“Sex is one of those things that can so waylay us here. That’s why I’m so careful and cautious. Fiona’s a seductress just by how she looks. You know that already, don’t you Andy?”

Andy did not want to answer. G. E. was insistent. At last, “Sir, she’s very good-looking. But so is that sports car I see our Theology teacher, Mr. Campbell, drive around in. I’ve

seen lots of guys – and girls – here admiring it, he of course above all, the way he shows it off.

“Isn’t the problem with how we respond to, to beauty? If I covet it, ‘lust’ Jesus called it, then I’m its slave...”

G. E. looked impatient, “Andy, don’t minimize sexual lusting!” he said imperiously.

Andy was angry. “I’m not, sir, I’m...” G. E.’s eyes were so offensive.

It would soon be lunch. He could hear people congregating outside the cafeteria below. They took most of their weekday meals there, but for supper once a week in the respective mish houses. This conversation felt surreal. He suddenly thought how anyone at university listening in might take it. He almost laughed at the thought...

This was surely not the respected G. E. he had known of, read, and a few times heard speak over the years.

He waited for G. E. to say something.

“Andy, that’s all for now. I’ll be before the Lord on this. I may phone your dad. Whatever else, I expect there will be no more shenanigans from you. We simply have no room for such moral lapses at *GO*.” His tone was ominous.

As it turns out, Andy is forbidden any kind of interaction with Fiona, the beautiful Texan, except in the context of classes, etc., where only the most perfunctory of verbal exchanges is permitted.

A few months later, he receives this letter from G. E.:

*December 30, 1971*

*Dearest Andy:*

*We still have some more work to do, my brother. I have a busy travel schedule for the next two months. So I am booking the last Friday of January and February at 4:30 p.m. in my office for our times together.*

*Meanwhile, I continue to prohibit any times together between you and Fiona. It is enough that you are simply civil to her. You do not know all that is going on with her (her burden is not light), as she about you. She only knows from me in a general way that I have concerns about you and relationships with the opposite sex. It is you who must exercise the discipline of abstinence. You are training as a soldier for Christ. There are hardships to endure, disciplines to develop, and eventually victories to win.*

*If you are to serve as the Lord’s foot-soldier in West Berlin alongside Fiona and the others, you must have well-developed habits of single-mindedness. I use that word ever so deliberately. Andy, you must learn to keep your eyes undistractedly on Christ during the rest of this training and throughout your two years overseas. I fear, otherwise,*

*disaster. I have seen it in others before, with singular gifts. I need not supply details of past trainee failures to remind you the devil goes about as a roaring lion. I want you to last on the mission field, Andy. Your fellow-soldiers need you. God needs you! Don't throw away this calling from God for a mess of pottage...*

*I believe you can gain victory, Andy, for God's glory. I'm praying for it fervently. You need not give in to Eve's temptations. You can do it! You will overcome.*

*Triumphantly in Christ*

*G. E. Moore*

The next excerpt is about a year later and worlds apart, towards the end of the novel. Andy in the interval has wrestled with enormous questions of faith, violence and sexuality in a crucible of grating uncertainty that makes him think more than once he is a hapless caterpillar that has crawled into a cocoon from which emerging means a totally beyond-imagining changed Andy.

On a visit by G. E. to West Berlin, it is now Andy's turn, details not supplied in this meditation, to catch G. E. out in illicit sexual behaviour much more serious than Andy's, *especially* in light of G. E.'s own prohibitions and stern moralizings. We pick up the story just after Andy, now tables turned, has confronted G. E.

Andy stood amazed at his own non-judgemental attitude towards G. E. A year ago, would he have so calmly been discussing such a revelation? Not on your life! Had he simply become that dreaded word, "Liberal"?

Andy said, "I guess you'll have to reveal this to your wife, and to your community somehow. I suspect it will be devastating for everyone concerned." He thought of Dan. He said it without an accusatory tinge. Andy realized he was feeling great pity for G. E. at that moment.

Andy ventured, "Am I right in guessing that all sexual sins relate to the issue of freedom? What permits us to live uncluttered, free lives? Love of God and neighbour. Simple. Profound. Impossible. All of the above. But also consistent with a Creator who would have us live out lives designed to make us most fully human.

"Maybe this gets us away from just religious notions of sin and... well, life itself. I don't know. But just maybe it makes sense to obey God not out of religiosity, but for freedom to most demonstrably erupt in our lives."

Andy stood up; surrounding pigeons suddenly leapt up *en masse*. Andy was feeling very free too.

G. E. asked, barely audibly, "Are you going to tell anyone?"

"No. That is your business, G. E.; between you and God I think – and your family and community. Though Janys knows. I'll ask her to say nothing."

G. E. returned to the apartment. Andy sat down again on the bench, pondering, wondering. Did he even catch himself praying?

Events in the novel lead to Andy's soon afterwards quitting the evangelistic two-year outreach campaign in West Berlin. He has had enough. Unanswered questions alone have engulfed like a tidal wave, apart from G. E.'s revelation, and lots more.

In a penultimate chapter, Andy writes one more time (there have been many) to a future imagined self. The letter reads in part:

*Last night I had a dream:*

...

***G. E. returns home and tearfully confesses to his wife, his kids, his church, his worldwide constituency, that he has sinned before God and man, and is no longer worthy to be called husband or father or church leader. But he is embraced at every point of brokenness, and though it is long, the day comes when he is fully restored to fellowship with all he has broken. This includes each of his sexual partners, whom he one by one tracks down and offers apologies to, consequently receiving forgiveness and reconciliation. That is extended to all their families as well. The healing is enormous undertaking but the ripples eventually reach the most distant shores.***

...

***And all the other trainees at the Centre; wider Brethrenism and Evangelicalism; all Christendom? The majority gets it for the first time in two thousand years (!!!) about the inviolability of the tight bond between love of God and love of neighbour/enemy; between justification by faith and demonstration by deeds of charity, ever two sides of the same coin. They consequently beat all their swords into ploughshares, and witness to the State to do the same, since there is only one ethic for the cosmos; which when a second is claimed smuggles violence and brokenness right back in through the back door of "just war" – an utter abomination. And the church universal for once becomes in real time what the universe is destined to be beyond time: a place where they will cease their violence utterly. Like the text in Isaiah: They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.***

*This is the cosmic destiny every fibre in our beings yearns for. God pulls off a most amazing thing: he sets a force in motion that actually retroactively flushes the entire sweep of cosmic history clean. And all humanity so washed streams into the New City which is the Old Eden which is Kingdom Come.*

...

*Application*

The *spiritual way* is ever one of *reversals*: the Pharisee however upright and moral fails to discover there is no standing before God without brokenness. G. E. discovers the same in Andy's dream, if he doesn't get it in "real life" outside the confines of the novel.

And we at LMF?: what are our needed reversals to *see* our brokenness aright to become justified and free? What are *we* most proud about that makes us the Pharisee in the text? What should *we* be most repentant about, most needing to let go, to allow us to leave this "temple", this church "justified"?

Some possibilities I throw out for you to ponder, and leave others you alone know for you to name:

- Our reputation as a "peace" church when there are unresolved interpersonal conflicts
- Our reputation as a "justice" church when we embrace issues selectively. What about homosexuality; abortion; prisoners; sex offenders; others you can name?
- Our reputation as being "tolerant" to the point of never challenging ourselves to personal or political/social holiness
- Our reputation as "Mennonite" if it means primarily *ethnicity* and *priding oneself* on belonging to the "inner circle" of "arrived saints" over against *those others* – a phenomenon common to all Gnosticisms
- Our reputation as "Anabaptist" when it embraces the DNA of schism in which Protestantism, all 35,000 denominations and counting, is hopelessly embroiled
- Okay, for some, our resistance to being Anabaptist/Mennonite *on principle*: what principle?
- Our reputation as so intellectually sophisticated about the Bible that it is "rescued from the Fundamentalists" à la Bishop Spong to such an extent that the Bible at best serves only as religious icon, at worst simply is no longer read, or taken, seriously
- Our reputation as Jesus followers when it is safer and easier to stick with "tradition" à la Fiddler on the Roof into which Procrustean bed we also make Jesus fit

Christian spirituality is all about surprising *reversals*. May we continue to be open to God's serendipity that offers to turn us *upside-down* that we may see *right-side-up*. In that case, we may have a shot at exiting the church today, "justified". Though don't waste time wondering about it...

Amen!