

Homily – What in the World

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Trunk... boot

French fries... chips

Potato chips... crisps

Silverware... cutlery

Flash light... torch

Crosswalk... zebra crossing

Sweater... jumper

Many of you here today recognize these pairs of words. The first word in the pair is what we say here in the United States, and the second word is what is said in the United Kingdom. In the U.S. a trunk is the rear compartment of a car, and in the U.K. this is called a boot. We have different words for the same things.

And sometimes the same word means very different things. Trunk can mean the long nose of an elephant, or it can be a synonym for suitcase, or it be the rear of a car. And boot can be what you wear on your foot, or you can give someone the boot by removing them from a train, or it can be the rear of a car. Words can mean different things.

This is one of the reasons that in seminary I was required to take two years of Greek and one year of Hebrew. Our New Testament was originally written in ancient Greek, and while the oldest known version of the Old Testament was also written in Greek, its traditional language in Hebrew. There is a general belief that we have a better, cleaner, understanding of the Bible when we can read it in its original language.

Curiously, this does not always help us with a good understanding of the Bible.. The word “flesh” is a good example. The ancient Greek word for flesh is “sarx”. Sarx means flesh, meat, body, or sinful nature. Sarx has a negative connotation to it. In the Gospel of Mark it is written “keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul is most known for using the word sarx in his letters. In Paul’s letter to the Romans it is written “While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” And, then later in the same chapter of Romans “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” So for the last two thousand years, since Paul wrote these words, we have treated the flesh and body as

very bad things. In this way of thinking the flesh must be controlled for it is the source of lusts and sinful things.

However, knowing that the ancient Greek word, sarx, means flesh doesn't help, because Paul uses the word to mean something for which, in his day, there was no concept or word. Today, we would use the word ego instead of flesh. And I use the word ego here not as it was used by Freud, but as it was used by the great spiritual writer, Thomas Merton to mean the false self. Your False Self is your necessary warm-up act, the ego part of you that establishes your unique identify, which is thus experienced as separate, especially in the first half of life. Your False Self is what changes, passes, and dies when you die. Only your True Self lives forever. Your False Self is who you think you are, but your thinking does not make it true. Thomas Merton rightly recognized that it was not the body that had to "die" but the False Self. All mature religion talk about the death of any notion of separate, and therefore false self and a movement or unpacking of the True Self that is at our core.

So listen to the passage I read early with the word ego insert instead of flesh. In the Gospel of Mark it is written "keep awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit is willing, but the ego is weak." And, in Paul's letter to the Romans it is written "While we were living in the ego, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." And, then later in the same chapter of Romans "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the ego, sold into slavery under sin... For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my ego. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." Replacing the word flesh with the word ego gives us a better, cleaner understanding of these passages that can now aid rather than hinder us on our spiritual journeys.

As an illustration of this aid here is the first joke I ever learned about Episcopalians. Why are there no Episcopalians in hell? Because we are all in heaven, drinking and having sex, because we just don't care about such things. We don't demonize the flesh. Instead, we go in the inner journey to release the ego and false self. Sin and the barriers we have to healthy, loving relationship do not come from the flesh. They come from the ego and false self.

Now, the word flesh does not appear in today, Scripture readings. However, there is another word that is used that I want to help you reframe. If you read Richard Rohr's blog then you will have read some of this in last week's daily posts. The word that I want to talk about now is the word, world. In ancient Greek this is the word cosmos, and cosmos is used five times in today's Gospel reading. "I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world."

The ancient Greek word cosmos means world, humankind, earth, and curiously, adornment, and decoration. A few moments ago, I substituted ego or false self for

flesh. And now I want to reframe the word cosmos or world. Yes, the word world refers to this earthly plane of existence. But, in today's Gospel reading a better way to define world is to think of it as world-systems or put another way the underlying cultures of our collective institutions. And, when Jesus or the Apostle Paul talk about world in a negative way, it is not because earthly, worldly existence is bad. God created the world and declared it good. Instead it is because the underlying world-systems are the source of evil. Let me explain.

For the first thousand years after his death, followers of Jesus assumed there were two sources of evil: the flesh, and the world, today's two words. However, in the most recent centuries we have shifted so that evil is only seen as individual sin that can be defined and controlled with purity codes. We lost the sense of sin's collective nature. Institutions such as a lumberyard or a city government possess an outer, physical manifestation (buildings, personnel, trucks, fax machines) and an inner spirituality, corporate culture, or collective personality. Perhaps we are not accustomed to thinking of the Pentagon, or the Chrysler Corporation as having a spirituality, but they do. These days we call this a corporate ethos or institutional culture. Be that as it may, there is a spirituality at the center of political, economic, and cultural institutions. And, what Jesus and the Apostle Paul recognized is that it is almost impossible for any social grouping to be consistently selfless. The institution has to maintain and promote itself first at virtually any cost, sacrificing even its own stated ethics and morality.

Today, our world is in so much trouble, not because individuals are evil. Instead, we are in trouble because we have stopped seeing the evil that is done collectively by our world systems and institutions. Our worldly institutions cause havoc and we must see it, question it, and correct it. Quite the task. And, if evil is so profoundly systemic, what chance do we have of bringing institutions into line with God's purpose for them? The answer to that question hinges on how we conceive of institutional evil. Are the worldly-systems intrinsically evil? Or are some good? Or are they scattered all along the spectrum from good to evil? The answer seems to be: none of the above. Rather, they are at once good and evil, though to varying degrees, and they are capable of improvement. So in today's Gospel reading Jesus is not putting down this earthly existence in which his followers reside. Instead, he is showing that his followers, and by extension we, are bound and hobbled by the world or world systems in which we are all embedded.

But, we still have hope. As we see in his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus was able to stand outside the sins of the ego and the systemic sins of the world. In fact, he named them over and over so that we can see them as well. And, Jesus suffered because of evil. And after he suffered death on the Cross, Jesus did not come back to vanquish and punish the institutions that crucified him. He did not condemn all of us who are still captive to the systems of the world. Instead, he came back and forgave.

Here is the key to understanding this. Sin, and evil, included and forgiven is the Divine Plan. The absolute centrality of forgiveness in Jesus' teaching should make this obvious. Forgiveness doesn't nullify or eliminate offensive actions. It acknowledges and radically names and exposes that sin, evil, and fault did indeed happen. And then lets go of it. Forgiveness does not, and cannot, undo evil. It can't. Sin and evil happened. God does not undo the sins of humanity or of history, but from an infinite Source, forgives them. The only final answer is God's infinite Love and our ability to endlessly draw upon it. And that is our victory in itself.

The reframing of sin as coming from the ego and the systems of the world has been intellectual head exercise. We can understand evil in a way that strengthen our spiritual journeys. However, the continuing embrace of forgiveness is the goal of this new understanding and the goal of the journey. God's grace does not erase evil of the ego or evil of the world. It folds it in and lets us move forward into healthy loving relationship with God, others, self, and rest of non-human creation.

Hope, love, grace, mercy, and joy. These words all have different meanings. But, they all point to our God of unbounded forgiveness.