

In The Trenches

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Here we are, back at work, the whirlwind summer behind us, the suitcases, backpacks and float toys in the attic. Some of us are already calculating our remaining vacation time for the holidays, some of us are still trying to catch our breath as we scramble to get ready for school and some of us are looking at a totally new horizon as we retire or settle into a convalescence, which has brought our applecart to a shuddering halt, leaving us to sort apples before we can do anything else.

Life in the trenches. Always there. Sometimes changing in a mercurial pattern which shows a different face every morning, sometime so predictable we could cry with the boredom. And yet still the place in which we are called to be holy in God's sight.

I suppose the operative word here could be holy, but something tells me that the phrase "in God's sight" is far more important. What exactly does it mean to be holy in God's sight? What does it take? How do we do it? Ah, yes, the old 'How' question. We in this culture are so very concerned with how. How to, how much, how many, how long? Always calculating, limiting, trying to stuff life into a workable package, achieving a 'positive outcome.'

What in the world is a 'positive outcome' anyway? In my field, a positive outcome is a live baby. Nice, eh? Here we have reduced the miracle of birth and death to two words that could also be applied to winning the lottery or driving away in a new car with a laundry list of extras at no extra charge. Where do we find the guidelines for holiness? How do we achieve the ultimate 'positive outcome'? What make a successfully 'holy' person?

It is no secret that we in America are success oriented to the point of obsession. And it does not seem to matter what we are successfully doing. No matter what the moral fiber of a person may be, if they have achieved their goals, they are worthy of our attention, our money, our confidence. They are 'holy' in our sight.

It is remarkably easy to become a god in our society. It is a strange and particular quirk in human nature to exalt people who achieve a positive outcome in human endeavors, despite the commission of serious immoral acts while in pursuit of these goals. I imagine if Cain were alive today, there would be a very strong case in his favor if killing Abel had somehow helped him achieve his goal. Unfortunately for Cain, there were not enough people around to raise his self-esteem and he had to find favor with God and with only God to judge his achievement. He did not achieve a positive outcome. It looks like poor Cain was ahead of his time. Had there been more of an audience, I imagine he could have been on a talk show.

There is a footnote in the Jerusalem Bible corresponding to Cain and Abel's story in Genesis 4: 3-5. It states, "Such preference demonstrates the freedom of God's choice, His contempt for earthly standards of greatness, and His regard for the lowly." There is no confusion here about holiness in God's sight.

So, where does this leave us, as we greet each morning? Again, as always, with a choice.

We can choose to open our eyes, look around our rooms and sigh, knowing that we won't be paid what we're worth, we probably won't get home on time for dinner, and we may end up missing lunch. We can shuffle off to the bathroom griping to ourselves about the weather, the kid who used the last towel, the fact that we have no where to go today and that the TV reception is no good and the VCR is broken. We can grouse about the coffee, the traffic, the lawn crew next door ruining our peace and quiet; we can go on and on hitting whatever poor Abel meanders along the path with us.

Or we can enter our work with an open heart, grateful, as the poor are grateful, that the violent spared our life, that the rain didn't wash our belongings away, that the bathroom is clean and the toilet flushes. We can sigh with gratitude for the privacy to put on clean underwear, for the aches caused by gardening and not by chains around our ankles, for the love that left the coffee warm even as it devoured the last danish pastry. We can praise God for another chance to love Him, to well up with a passion for living in His world. To be holy.

To be holy in God's sight. Imagine that. Take a minute and imagine what that feels like. Some of us know, and need only to remember, to breathe deeply of the sweetness of God and know that it is His love that makes us holy. Some of us have forgotten, and need to reach deep into the recesses of our hearts and find again the place where we have been loved. Some, perhaps have never stopped long enough in the quest for that elusive 'positive outcome' to know what it feels like to be loved so well as to be made holy by that Love.

Let us begin again. The true prayer of the penitent: "Let us begin again." The true gift of the forgiven. The chance to turn it all around, to choose life.

We can be Cain or we can be Abel. It depends on which outcome we really want. Whether God asks us to guide new babies into the world today or sort apples in the privacy of our own rooms, the choice is ours to make.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord and thank you for the chance to share these thoughts.

