

Just Because We Breathe: The Advent of Worthiness

In commemoration of World AIDS Day, I'd like to have a moment of silence for the 25 million souls who have died from the virus, 636,000 in the United States, and for those currently living with the virus, as well as those who work to end this pandemic and the stigma associated with it.

May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight,
O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Worthy. I'd like to begin this sermon with an incredibly powerful story—one that underscores how utterly essential our Advent theme of Worthy is—that it is, in fact, a matter of life-and-death.

Linda & Rob Robertson were good Christian evangelists, they had 4 children—2 sons and 2 daughters. Ryan was their oldest son, and in November 2001 he revealed to them in a wrenching series of text messages that he was gay. This began an 8 year odyssey of a family wrestling with their religious beliefs, beliefs characterized by the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin”. Practically speaking, this meant Ryan entering ex-gay therapy and “pray away the gay” activities, all unsuccessful. Eventually, Ryan, filled with desperate self-loathing began to use alcohol and drugs with a ferocity that left his family fearing for his life. Ryan left home, and for 18 months his family lost contact with him.

During these terrifying months, Linda & Rob, worried endlessly about their son's well-being. In her story that appeared in the *Huffington Post*,¹

She wrote: we didn't know where he was, or even if he was dead or alive. And during that horrific time, God had our full attention. We stopped praying for Ryan to become straight. We started praying for him to know that God loved him. We stopped praying for him never to have a boyfriend. We started praying that someday we might actually get to know his boyfriend. We even stopped praying for him to come home to us; we only wanted him to come home to God.

Ryan eventually came home, and Linda wrote: Over the next ten months, we learned to *truly* love our son. Period. No buts. No conditions. Just because he breathes.

By the time our son called us..... God had completely changed our perspective. Because Ryan had done some pretty terrible things while using drugs, the first thing he asked me was this:

Do you think you can ever forgive me? (I told him of course, he was already forgiven. He had ALWAYS been forgiven.)

Do you think you could ever love me again? (I told him that we had never stopped loving him, not for one second. We loved him then more than we had ever loved him.)

Do you think you could ever love me with a boyfriend? (Crying, I told him that we could love him with fifteen boyfriends. We just wanted him back in our lives. We just wanted to have a relationship with him again...AND with his boyfriend.)

And a new journey was begun. One of healing, restoration, open communication and grace. LOTS of grace. And God was present every step of the way, leading and guiding us, gently reminding us simply to love our son, and leave the rest up to Him.

Linda and Rob Robertson hit bedrock—the realization that what their son needed most was an unconditional love--a belief that he was worthy.

Over the next 10 months Linda describes a period filled with grace—learning to whoever Ryan loved, making mistakes and learning to forgive one another, and supporting Ryan's recovery from alcohol and drug abuse.

Ryan Robertson relapsed one fateful evening and ended up with severe brain damage and almost completely paralyzed. Still, the doctors were amazed and thought he might live despite everything. However, on July 16, 2009, Ryan died unexpectedly. He was only 20 years old.

It goes without saying that this is a heartbreaking, soul-shattering story. I recall the experience I had reading it, how I wept, how it got under my skin, because there were similarities to my own journey, and because there are countless Ryans in the world who without some grace-filled presence, have or will suffer a similar fate.

But what struck me beyond the devastation of the story was how the Robertsons chose to deal with the aftermath of Ryan's death—rather than harbor bitterness they chose a path of openheartedness, by sharing their experience with others in the hopes that no one would ever have to suffer Ryan's fate. They also chose the path of forgiveness, of themselves, for not comprehending the full impact of their actions on Ryan during his vulnerable formative years. Indeed, theirs is a ministry to evangelicals and beyond to love what you hold dear, to love it just because it draws breath. That alone makes it worthy.

In reflecting upon this story and its meaning, it's crucial to understand that worthiness and goodness are not the same thing. It's easy to make this mistake. The equation is simple: I am worthy because I do "good things." The world often rewards us for doing good things, for our achievements, in various ways. While this kind of goodness has its

place, it is not ultimate, and the gospel, in usual fashion, upends our understanding, when Jesus says plainly, emphatically, only God is good!

But wait a minute, isn't goodness what it's all about, what we all aspire to?! And if so, what on earth does this mean, only God is good?: I'd like to suggest that Goodness in the gospel reading implies something of a different order, something that comes ultimately from our creator—something radically complete, unqualified, and unconditional. We humans are imperfect, contingent, and conditional beings—we are mortals. But what this doesn't mean is that we are worthless! Let me repeat, it doesn't mean that we are worthless.

Nevertheless, this is humbling, meaning that at its best keeps us right sized, somewhere between the dust and the crown Sister Courtney preached about several weeks back. Personally, I've come to know that even my "good deeds" come with hidden agendas, mixed motives, self-seeking and aggrandizing, and things I don't always understand about myself, which is profoundly maddening and frustrating, to say the least. I suspect that I'm not alone in these painful self-assessments, but I won't ask anyone here to tell on him or herself!

While It would be easy to be dejected about our inability to achieve goodness—Godness—of our own will and accord, I should remind us all that for the past 27 weeks we have traversed a period of time following Pentecost—the celebration of God's spirit being poured out on us. It's a season known as Ordinary Time, but the name is misleading, for to live in the realization that we have a presence, God's spirit, that guides us into love, truth, and a deeper humanity, is anything but ordinary. Ultimately, this is the true goodness that finds us—it is our wellspring.

Another key ingredient to understanding worthiness can be found in today's reading in Genesis, which tells us that we are all made in our creator's like-ness, female, male, and as we are now beginning to understand as the spirit leads us into deeper truths, everyone along the gender spectrum. We are all made in God's image and reflection, as some translations render it.

God likes us, so much so that we are made in God's like-ness! Take a deep breath and try to let that sink in. The creation story describes a God who fashions us from the earth in God's like-ness, a beautifully intimate, humble act. It should give us pause to consider that it's like-ness appears in the Bible before the word love ever does.

I have to admit that the idea that God likes us first struck me as odd and frighteningly New-Agey, but I have grown in the realization that this is absolutely essential to spiritual health, and to understanding salvation as a process. Here I am eternally grateful to

James Alison, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian who writes extensively about salvation as a process of being loved into being by a God who likes us FIRST.

Why is the assertion that God likes us so important? Because like is much humbler concept than love. Like doesn't carry with it the connotations of joyless obligation and duty—you know, the I-love-you-even-though-I-don't-like-you line, and all its variations.

James Alison puts it this way:

We need to take love to the laundry.....The word "like" is rather more difficult to twist into a lie than the word 'love', because we know when someone likes us. We can tell because they enjoy being with us, alongside us, want to share our company. He goes on further to say, "that if our understanding of being loved does not include being liked, or at least being prepared to learn to be liked, then there's a good chance that we're talking about the sort of love that can slip a double bind over us, that is really saying to us "My love for you means that I will like you *if you become someone else.*"ⁱⁱ

Sisters and brothers, this should sound painfully familiar—it is a message that many of us have heard, subtly and explicitly. Ryan Robertson heard it, and so have countless others. No doubt many of the 25 million souls who perished from HIV/AIDS heard it, as well as those currently living with the virus. Bluntly put, the double bind is a LIE—it is the antithesis of the Gospel's message.

So my questions to you are, do you have someone in your life who really likes you? And how do you feel knowing that there's someone you likes you? Answer these questions in your heart. For me, having people in my life who really like me is a powerful antidote to the self-loathing masquerading as Christian virtue. Yes, I once believed self-hatred was noble, in no small part due to the lie that goodness leads to worthiness. Now I know, by the grace of God, that I had it backwards—worthiness leads to goodness.

What I have also found with being genuinely liked is that it brings out the best in me. It makes me want to be a better person. It softens me—my stony, defended heart becomes fleshy and vulnerable, and dare I say it, a goodness appears that's not rooted in fear of punishment, or a desperate, compulsive need to overcompensate out of a shame about not being good enough. It's easier to be myself, flaws and all. I can just breathe, everything softens. I am worthy—and so are you!

The achingly beautiful Christmas Hymn "Oh, Holy Night" says it spectacularly—"long lay the world in sin and error, pining, till he appeared and the soul felt its worth."

This is the season of longing and pining that culminates in the like-ness of God, the Christ, appearing like us. A God who likes us so much, that we begin to really like

ourselves and each other, to be transformed, born of Spirit, led into true goodness, being made anew.

We begin to discover that not only are we beloved, we are be-liked! That is Advent, brothers and sisters, and we are, indeed, worthy of that good news.

ⁱ Robertson, Linda. Just Because He Breathes: Learning to Truly Love Our Gay Son. Huffington Post: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/linda-robertson/just-because-he-breathes-learning-to-truly-love-our-gay-son_b_3478971.html

ⁱⁱ Alison, James. *On Being Liked*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004. Print