

FINDING MEANING THROUGH LITERATURE:
ALBERT CAMUS' FALL

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
July 28, 2013

Moral courage was the subject of my sermon last week, and I examined three different models of it through characters in a novel by South African author Nadine Gordimer. This week my subject is the failure of moral courage. God says to the prophet Hosea in today's reading from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible:ⁱ "Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord."ⁱⁱ As you can imagine, the references to "whoring" in Hosea have been much criticized by feminist scholars,ⁱⁱⁱ but this is a graphic image to describe how the nation of ancient Israel as a whole, largely led by men, has been unfaithful to the one God by following other deities in the Canaanite pantheon, pursuing sexualized fertility worship, engaging in reckless political intrigue, and promoting dramatically increasing differentials between rich and poor.^{iv} How could this happen to the great people who received the Ten Commandments at Sinai and supposedly entered into an eternal covenantal relationship with the one God, receiving his promises of blessings for generation after generation? The answer seems to be a profound failure of moral courage. Later in the book of Hosea, it's explained

that Israel has become a land of “lying and murder and stealing” where “bloodshed follows bloodshed.”^v

I find Albert Camus’ novel *The Fall* to be a wonderful way to examine the failure of moral courage that can afflict us all, in these times as well as in ancient Israel, and to illustrate what follows in its wake. I want to talk with you about *The Fall* today in the second of my four-part sermon series this summer on “Finding Meaning Through Literature.”

The main character is a lawyer named Jean-Baptiste Clamence, who spends most of the book in conversation with a drinking partner in and around a bar in Amsterdam. It’s not so much discussion as monologue, though, with Clamence explaining his life story to a stranger, interspersed with comments upon the stranger’s reactions. Clamence used to be a rich, well-known lawyer in Paris who specialized in noble cases of representing the poor and down trodden -- protecting widows and orphans, as he put it. He was above reproach in his professional life, certainly never having taken a bribe or engaged in any shady dealings but not even ever having flattered a civil servant or journalist to get him or her on his side. He took many cases for free, gave a good deal of money to charity, and found genuine happiness in being generous and compassionate to others.^{vi} He explains that he felt bathed in a light as of the Garden of Eden.^{vii}

But then he experienced the fall. Literally. Late one drizzling November night, as he was walking across a bridge over the River Seine, he passed “a slim young

woman dressed in black,” who was “leaning over the railing and seeming to stare at the river.” He felt sexually attracted to her: “The back of her neck, cool and damp between her dark hair and coat collar, stirred me.” Then here’s what he heard when he was fifty yards past the end of the bridge and walking along the banks of the river: “the sound – which despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence – of a body striking the water.” Almost at once he heard a cry that was repeated several times as it went downstream. He describes his reaction: “I wanted to run and yet didn’t stir. I was trembling, I believe from cold and shock. I told myself that I had to be quick and I felt an irresistible weakness steal over me. I have forgotten what I thought then. ‘Too late, too far...’ or something of the sort. I was still listening as I stood motionless. Then, slowly under the rain, I went away. I informed no one.”^{viii}

A complete failure of moral courage. Here are some of the ways he describes his own sense of having fallen as a result: “Maybe I wasn’t so admirable. From then on, I became distrustful...dissonances and disorder...filled me; I felt vulnerable and open to public accusation...it seemed to me that every one I encountered was looking at me with a hidden smile...Once my attention was aroused, it was not hard for me to discover that I had enemies. In my profession, to begin with, and also in my social life...”^{ix} Clamence also began to discover some very dark realities in his life: “I...went on playing my role as well as I could. I played at being...intelligent, virtuous, civic-minded...fellow-spirited, edifying,”^x but in fact he “contemplated...jostling the

blind on the street,” and receiving a “secret, unexpected joy” that this gave him. “I planned to puncture the tires of invalids’ vehicles, to go and shout ‘lousy proletarian’ under the scaffoldings on which laborers were working, to slap infants in the subway.”^{xii} He started getting upset about his positive reputation and wanting to destroy it. “‘A man like you...’ people would say sweetly, and I would blanch... In order to reveal to all eyes what he was made of, I wanted to break open the handsome wax-figure I presented everywhere.”^{xiii}

Things went from bad to worse. He began whoring and getting drunk: “Because I longed for eternal life, I went to bed with harlots and drank for nights on end.”^{xiii} The result ultimately, though was liver problems “and a fatigue so dreadful that it hasn’t yet left me. One plays at being immortal and after a few weeks one doesn’t even know whether or not one can hang on till the next day.”^{xiv} And religion was of no help to him: “Believe me, religions are on the wrong track the moment they moralize and fulminate commandments. God is not needed to create guilt or to punish. Our fellow men suffice, aided by ourselves.”^{xv} And Jesus seemed to be a hypocrite to him: “If he did not bear the weight of the crime he was accused of [when he was crucified], he had committed others. He must have heard of a certain Slaughter of the Innocents...the children of Judea massacred while his parents were taking him to a safe place [in Egypt] – why did they not die if not because of him.” He complained against God: “Why hast thou forsaken me?” Then, “he left us alone, to carry on, whatever happens.”^{xvi}

So, in the end, what answers does Clamence find for himself, after the fall?

Well, first, “indulging in public confession as often as possible” with people he meets in the Amsterdam bar, ultimately showing them “the features we have in common...the failings we share... imperceptibly I pass from the ‘I’ to the ‘we’ ... we are in the soup together.” Clamence then explains that “I provoke you into judging yourself, and this relieves me of that much of the burden... Just try. I shall listen, you may be sure, to your confession with a great feeling of fraternity.”^{xvii} At the very end of the book, Clamence admits that these words for years have been echoing through his mind as he wonders what happened to him one night on the banks of the River Seine and how he managed never to risk his life: “Oh, young woman, throw yourself into the water again so that I may a second time have the chance of saving both of us!” Then he imagines going through with it: “Brr...! The water’s so cold! But let’s not worry! It’s too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!”^{xviii}

And that’s how the book ends: “It’s too late now. It will always be too late. Fortunately!” Really? We’re all fallen. And that’s it? Fortunately?

Camus leaves us there. But today’s gospel lesson^{xix} takes us somewhere else after the failure of moral courage. One of his disciples asks Jesus how to pray, and he suggests these words (Luke’s account of the Lord’s Prayer being a little different from what we more commonly cite from Matthew’s wording): “Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time

of trial.” So, as I read it, Jesus suggests that there’s a new Garden of Eden out there beyond the fall: a kingdom of God. And we can pray about its coming.

Realistically and humanly, we will sin. We will have failures of moral courage. But there’s an alternative to saying, with Clamence, that it will always be too late to save others and to be saved ourselves. We can strive to forgive others their sins and we can hope that ours might be forgiven as well, not just by other people but also in an ultimate sense -- because there’s a law of love in the universe at large that some call God and that some see as having been magnificently exemplified in the life of Jesus.

Jesus asks his disciples to pray to God as Father, or to Abba, as he says more familiarly elsewhere.^{xx} Our best human image of unconditional love is that which we might receive from a perfect parent: a love that will never fail us, no matter how little we may deserve it. This is not to say that an ideal parent shouldn’t instruct, and that we shouldn’t do our best to honor those instructions. As one of the Ten Commandments exhorts: “Honor thy father and thy mother.”^{xxi} But as both Clamence and Jesus explain, we are fallen and will continue to sin and to have failures of moral courage, despite our best intentions and others’ best expectations of us. Clamence seems to think it’s always too late for clemency, though – for forgiveness, for mercy, for pardon. But Jesus tells the parable of the persistence of knocking at the door very late at night, even after the door has been locked and everybody’s tucked away in bed. Ultimately the friend who can’t be bothered will get up. So, Jesus tells us, “Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be

opened.” Jesus cites examples of good parenting even among people who do evil things and assures us, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” For me, that Holy Spirit is about love. God is about love. Jesus is about love. And the answer that Clamence gives us is not the final answer.

BENEDICTION

May the love which overcomes all differences,
Which heals all wounds, which puts to flight all fears,
Which reconciles all who are separated,

Be in us and among us, now and always. AMEN

Frederick E. Gillis

NOTES

ⁱ Hosea 1:2-10.

ⁱⁱ Hosea 1:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 572.

^{iv} Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 1193.

^v Hosea 4:2.

^{vi} Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 17-22.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 27.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 77-79.

^x *Ibid.*, p. 87.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 91.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 102.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 105.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, p. 110.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, pp. 112-114.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, p. 147.

^{xix} Luke 11:1-13.

^{xx} Mark 14:36

^{xxi} Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16.