

Brought Down From Behind

Genesis 19:15-26

Transfiguration – February 3, 2008

That poor lady! All she did was pause for one last glimpse of the city that had been home: a last look at the mall where she had shopped, at her exercise salon, at the farmer's market where she'd bought her produce, at her favorite Lebanese restaurant and at the club where she played golf every Tuesday. Oh, she knew the town wasn't all that it should be. Shekel and Farthing magazine kept rating it as "the pits" because of its corruption, poor schools, high crime rate, deteriorated infrastructure and the like. She did know that it was seen as "sin city" around the area. But for all of its flaws, it was nevertheless THEIR city. So the angels almost had to hogtie, drag and carry her family beyond the city limits to prevent them from getting caught in the impending destruction.

Why then, for something so understandable as having trouble letting go of Sodom, should Mrs. Lot end up as an ignominious pillar of salt: frozen, stuck, and stranded forever in that backward position? Isn't that just a bit excessive as a consequence for nothing more serious than taking a last, long, wistful look backward?

It's an odd anecdote, to say the least. Nevertheless, our ancient spiritual forefathers chose to include it as part of the earliest form of their scriptures. It wasn't, I suspect, because they were absolutely certain that somewhere on the plain near where the cities had once been, was a five foot tall shaft of sodium chloride wearing a scarf, windbreaker, skirt, sneakers, and still holding an overnight bag. No, like so many other stories they included, this became sacred to them because it echoed a familiar human problem. The warning wasn't against rubbernecking – not about slowing down out of morbid curiosity when you pass a disaster along the road. It's about the inability, when it came right down to it, of Mrs. Lot to keep moving forward rather than remain transfixed and stuck in the mess and destruction that lay behind her. As such, the story isn't primitive at all.

There's something powerfully tantalizing, beguiling – almost mesmerizing -- about things which have now turned out really badly. But instead of places, far more often they are old hurts, earlier mistakes, previous failures, lost opportunities, and collapsed dreams. The problem arises when, even though intellectually a persons knows that what is back there is done and gone and over with; that is, despite knowing that going back over it again accomplishes nothing, quite often comes the temptation and/or morbid compulsion to keep revisiting it. "Maybe if I go there again. Maybe if I see her just one more time. Maybe if I approach it differently this time. Maybe having been away from it for this long, I can go back and have an occasional cigarette or just a

social drink or gamble a few dollars strictly for the fun of it. Surely there's no harm in checking it out." As this ancient story had it, though, along the path leading away from Sodom and Gomorrah stood this ignominious, humanoid, salt statue reminding us that there's a brand of looking back that's anything but harmless.

A French film that I saw a number of years back is still vivid in my memory. It was one of Truffaut's films entitled, "The Woman Next Door." The plot of the film is set when a new family moves in next door to where a man named Bernard lives with his second wife and family. To Bernard's shock and anxiety, he discovers that his first wife, Mathilde, and her husband are the new residents. Bernard and Mathilde had been out of contact for years and she is as shocked as is he to now find herself his next door neighbor. Neither of them tell their present spouses who it is that lives next door. Initially they are both determined to minimize any contact with each other.

But then for some reason – maybe a tad like Mrs. Lot – they just cannot leave the past alone. As painful and destructive as their marriage to each other had been, they both seem impelled to go back and probe the ashes of that destructiveness.

They, in fact, secretly begin an affair with each other. But in their rendezvous they end up spending the majority of their time going back over, in hurtful ways, the very unhappiness that led to their divorce years before. It reignites enough old pain in both of them that it begins to have a destructive effect upon the way they are with their present spouses and families. Though their new family situations have been good and stable, they compulsively revisit what, back then, had been so deeply troubling between them to the net effect of its reopening the old wounds that had already once been their undoing. As perhaps you've already guessed, their going back to mess with it all, destroys them all over again – in fact, more so. The film ends in the murder-suicide of the two of them.

Would that ever really happen? Yes, I think so. It is, moreover, the nature of the warning sounded by this story of Mrs. Lot, stuck there, lifeless, looking backward because she wouldn't accept closure on her evaporated past.

But already occurring to you, I suspect, is that adage that says that those who FAIL to remember the past are condemned to have to live it all over again? Isn't there important truth to that? Obviously there is. (But as someone pointed out, "For every absolute truth there is also an exact opposite absolute truth.") In any case, yes, rejecting, denying, or ignoring the lessons of past experiences is its own form of craziness.

There is, though, a profound difference between moving forward armed with past experience, versus remaining anchored and entangled in that which is now over. It's a distinction that is often NOT well understood or well-handled. What it seems to be is the temptation, the danger and the habit of dwelling among the tombs of what once was; of feeling impelled to continue to pick over the bones of that which, for better or worse, is now dead and gone.

What tugs at us from the past isn't always as it was in this story: something negative. Instead of Sodom and Gomorrah, what is back there can be more like Camelot: something that, though now over and gone, was very good in its time (or at least appears to have been).

You'll know you're talking to someone with a bad case of that when you hear, for example, "If you had only known me back when..." or "I'll never stop hating myself for my stupidity in not realizing at the time, that I had the ideal job, (had the perfect husband, had the best possible arrangement), or "If there were just some way to get back to how it was when everyone went to church, when people subscribed to traditional family values, when people dressed decently." It's not to say, you see, that Camelot didn't have some good attributes. The tough truth here, though – the one with which Mrs. Lot collided – is that no matter how horrible or wonderful it once was, life must be lived forward "OR ELSE." To be unable or unwilling to allow closure, either to what was good or what was hurtful back then, is to cripple the present.

The same is obviously also true in regard to going back again and again to the messes, the wrongs and the embarrassments of the past. One wouldn't think that it would be much of a temptation to do so, but it often is. It's a perverse fascination that can be nearly as powerful as the temptation to go back to past glories. We probably do it hoping that, whatever it was, maybe by going back over it, it will reconstitute itself to be not so bad or wrong after all. "Maybe by my thinking it or saying it or arguing it from another direction, it can retroactively be made good. Maybe if I poke around long enough at whatever it was I'll arrive at a different verdict this time." The very attempt is as absurd as going back to watch the film, "Titanic," dozens of times, thinking that if I see it often enough, maybe one of these times it won't sink at the end or in some other way be less of a tragedy.

Don't tell yourself that this is only a harmless bit of mental activity because it's not harmless. It's actually destructive. Bernard and Mathilde's story was a near-perfect example. By not leaving behind them, the hurts, the conflicts, the mistakes of their failed marriage, their past was permitted, in effect, to overtake them -- to get at them a second time.

One frequently sees this become a problem within families. Perhaps it's because family members share so much of a past. Amazing and appalling to me has been how often it's at the

time of a death in the family that this comes to the surface. Perhaps it's the feeling, now with mother or father (or both) being dead, that there's something to be gained by returning and resurrecting the slights, the injustices, and the aberrations that occurred, back along the way, among the brothers and sisters of the family and/or their spouses. No, it doesn't turn them into pillars of salt (sometimes it might be better if it did), but the results are nevertheless terrible! Hauling forward like that, the ashes of the past to dump them into the present grief, is destructive, terrible, and inexcusable. But it happens amazingly often. Decades-old wounds and nearly-healed conflicts are ripped open all over again and salt is poured into them. It not only dirties-up the grief, it maims any possibility of future closeness among family members.

In a totally different venue, the consequences of failing to understand this appears in some of our cultural history. There seems to be a tragic example of it in our American society's attempt to go back, with all good intentions, to poke around in the ugliness that was done by our great, great, great, great grandfathers of the native Americans in the 18th and 19th centuries. What they did back there was cruel, was ghastly, and was utterly reprehensible. One would hope that by as much as we're appalled by it, we understand something about the depravity of all cultural arrogance, then and now. What is NOT turning out well, though is the illusion that it can be made right by conferring upon the great, great, great grandchildren of those abused and murdered native Americans, entitlements, legal exceptions, and ill-conceived benefits (that are anything but beneficial); ones which now seem to be wreaking their own special brand of destruction upon the descendants of those abused in the past. As well-meant as it is, here too, trying to go back to where we aren't able to get to, seems to be permitting the former destruction to catch up and claim new victims.

It shouldn't be necessary to belabor this further. "No one," Jesus said at one point, "who sets his hand to the plow and keeps looking back is fit for the kingdom of God." Though you probably haven't done any plowing lately, his image is a clear and simple one. One cannot plow the field looking backward without messing up the field.

So what it comes down to is a kind of question that we do well to ask ourselves from time to time. In fact, maybe that time is right now for some of us.

Where am I – where are you – desperately in need of firm closure on what has been a part of our past? Is it an old relationship? Is it a dumb mistake? Is it an old sore spot that we've kept open? Is it an ignored opportunity? Is it an instance of cowardice or weakness? What troubling episodes in our living are we still allowing to tug at us from behind, occupy our imaginations, or make morbid our curiosity? Or is there some mountaintop glow of a past success in which

we're still trying to bask? Is there anything at all that still manages to suck us back for one more orgy of self-hate, or self-pity, or of self-doubt or reignited guilt? Maybe not. I hope not.

But wherever so, I'll simply remind us all again that right at the core of the Christian faith is full permission to bring it to a close. "Old things are passed away," the scripture says, "Behold, all things become new." We observe the sacrament of Communion regularly as a meal which allows us new beginnings, a new start, a putting away of the past and moving on. "Behold, all things become new." You'd better believe it. There's not much of a market for statues made of salt -- not even ones of you and me.