

God Gave Them the Same Gift  
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We have all heard the phrase “guilt by association.” It is what is known as a inductive informal fallacy by students of logic. When we think examples of guilt by association through, we are often struck by how silly they are. For instance, you may have heard this one: John is a criminal. John has black hair. Therefore, all people with black hair are criminals. Or: All dogs have four legs; my cat has four legs. Therefore, my cat is a dog. Guilt by association appeals to our emotions, not our reason.

Before this week, I had never heard the phrase “honor by association.” But it makes sense that this would be the flip side of the first fallacy. An example: Citizens of Country X have won more Nobel Prizes, gold medals, and literary awards than citizens of Country Y. Therefore, any citizen of Country X is superior to any citizen of Country Y.

But in spite of our recognition that these are logical fallacies, human beings care about association. It matters that we are connected, and to whom we are connected. Even though we do not live in an ancient honor/shame culture, we still honor people and shame people, we cling to those who seem admirable and shun association with the disreputable. Somehow, we believe that qualities like that rub off, by association.

I bring all this up to speak about Jesus’ words to his disciples during his life, and how it all played out after his death. In the Gospel passage I read earlier, Jesus is sitting at his last meal with his friends. Judas has just left, on his way to betray Jesus, with Jesus’ full knowledge. Instead of bewailing his fate, or badmouthing his betrayer, Jesus launches into a speech about glory and love. This is an interesting word, “glory.” The Gospel writer John loves this word. But it is used in a paradoxical way – not as wealth or fame or obvious superiority. It describes Jesus’ particular role in the reconciliation of human and divine. The Greek word is *doxa* (as in doxology) and it does not have an exact English meaning. In other Greek literature, in classical Greek, it means something like worth or reputation.

So let’s paraphrase what Jesus says (referring to himself in the third person as the Son of Man):

“When Judas had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man has a certain reputation, and through him, God will be seen as having a similar reputation. If God is honored above all because of him, God will also shower him with honor, and establish his reputation at once.”

Jesus is talking here about his own honor, his own good name, and God’s public honor, and the relationship between them. He is saying that what he does reflects on God, and that God will act to establish or restore Jesus’s reputation. As we know, this has been a big question in Jesus’ life and ministry. He often associated with **disreputable** people, **inglorious** people. He ate meals with prostitutes, swindlers and lepers. He refused to maintain religious and cultural boundaries. He hung

around with the wrong people. His overt disregard for the rules, his refusal to “color inside the lines,” provoked hostility and fear, and eventually his own arrest and death.

The second half of the little speech is about love. They are commanded to love one another. Though he does not use the word glory or reputation, it is clear that this is on his mind: “By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” “This is the quality that people should associate with you,” in other words. Work on your reputation for loving even the disreputable among you.

Jesus’ followers treasured his words. They tried their best to act upon them, as we do. They tried to redefine community, to create a beloved community, as Marcus Borg has described it: “a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by the ethos and politics of compassion.” But some habits are hard to shake. Some communities are hard to crack open. Some circumstances are so dangerous and threatening that we prefer the comfort of what we know well.

Let’s travel a few years forward in time – we don’t really know how long - to the story of Peter and his trip from Joppa to Caesarea to Jerusalem. Peter, one of the leaders of the Christian community, has had some amazing experiences: visions and encounters that really pushed his boundaries. But rumors had preceded his return to Jerusalem: Peter was associating with Gentiles...not only speaking to them, but eating with them! Guilt by association! Guilt by table fellowship! Now, Peter had been a devout Jew. At least he said to the voice in his dream, “nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” He has always kept kosher. Which would mean avoiding meat from all the animals in his vision, and avoiding the dining rooms and kitchens of Gentiles. But God, apparently, was redefining the world as Peter knew it. The Holy Spirit pushes him out the door when the 3 messengers arrive, telling him not to make a distinction between “them and us.”

What happens next confirms the vision and the promptings of the Spirit. Peter has barely opened his mouth to preach his best evangelical sermon to the household of Cornelius when the “same gift” of the Holy Spirit visits these Gentiles. Another Pentecost! And Peter remembers Jesus’ words. He is inspired by the memory of Jesus. God gave them the same gift – how can we hinder God by **not** associating with them?

We could say that this story is just about a few arcane rules about food and cleanliness that we don’t even care about any more. But it is bigger than that. No person and no thing is unclean. No person and no thing is beyond the touch of the Spirit. Our acceptance and our salvation is not grounded in homogeneity or uniformity or even safety, but in divine blessing. All are part of a potential community of love. All are within the embrace of God: **all** creatures of our God and King, as the hymn goes.

Jesus calls us to a boundary-breaking love, one that gives us a reputation for love and welcome. The actions of Jesus showed us a new revelation of God’s character and “reputation,” and we are to continue this revelation. We are to find common ground with the “other” through that “same gift”: the Holy Spirit that descends, without warning, it seems, when the boundaries between insider and outsider are crossed. Our concerns, our disgust that masks itself as religiosity, our fear that masks itself as high standards, our self-satisfaction that masks itself as patriotism, may be hindrances to powerful movements of the Spirit. And so we would do well to honor the courage of Peter, who recognized a new way to reveal God’s glory.

I have heard a more modern take on this idea, one that provokes some thoughts about our everyday interactions. It is this observation, made by a number of people. I can't find the origin of the quote – unless it is from the Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai, but it is this: “Nobody is nobody. Everyone has something to offer.” Or, we might say, every encounter has a potential gift, hidden within it. And, so often, these gifts show up unexpectedly, through some mysterious connection in conversation or kindness or even confrontation. At times, some kind of common ground is discovered, through that “same gift” – a Spirit that descends without warning. At other times, something is revealed to us about the nature of our own convictions or characters – a different kind of gift. Cornelius had something to offer Peter. Peter had something to offer his friends in Jerusalem. And they all needed each other.

In 2004 the United Church of Christ started a campaign with the sentence “God is Still Speaking.” We believe that God speaks in Scripture, in our communal life, in our inner spiritual wrestlings. But perhaps God's most compelling and mysterious voice, God's most surprising gift, is heard in the space between strangers seeking common ground.

I said earlier that God was redefining the world as Peter knew it. And we might acknowledge that God is still redefining the world as we know it. But in some ways this is really a recognition of the world as it is: a ecosystem that needs diversity. When we celebrate Earth Day, as we did last Friday, we do not just celebrate our own beautiful corner of creation. We recognize the amazing, interconnected, fragile, powerful sphere of existence that floats through space. We need the multiple “associations” of our ecosystem, we cannot dismiss parts of it as unnecessary or unclean, and we exploit it at our peril.

Maybe one thing you might try in the upcoming week is to examine, either within yourself or in conversation, one thing that you find foreign or disreputable or unclean. What do your feelings say about you, and what do they say about where God is speaking? It is just possible that there is a boundary to be crossed, one that requires courage, forgiveness, compassion and trust. And it is just possible that it requires the breath of the Holy Spirit, which blows into our lives, sweeps away the mist obscuring our sight, and allows us to see a new heaven and a new earth, all things made new. Amen.