

December 24, 2017 – Tell Me that You Love Me Then

Luke 1:26-38

I remember clearly the day I told my parents that I was leaving my job at IBM Canada to go back to school to study for ministry in the church. I was terrified. I knew how much they valued security and how proud they were of my success in my job. I was worried that they would be disappointed in me, that they would see this change as some kind of failure in my life. It was nearly as scary as the day I told them I was gay.

How many of you have had similar feelings? How many of you have trembled before saying that familiar phrase, “Mom, Dad, I’ve got something to tell you...” How many of you have worried not just about disappointing your parents, but possibly about losing their love and support as well? Maybe when you were a teen you had to say, “Mom, Dad, I was in accident, I’m OK, but your car is a right off.” Maybe as an adult you had to share the news, “Mom, Dad, I know you just finished paying off the wedding, but it’s just not going to work, we’ve decided to separate.” Maybe you’ve even called them from the police station, “Mom, Dad, I’ve been arrested.” Those conversations can be truly terrifying and in those moments what we really need is the assurance that they still care: “Tell me that you love me then.”

In today’s scripture reading, Mary has just found out that she is going to have a baby... a baby out of wedlock. Whether you believe that Mary’s baby was conceived by the Holy Spirit, or not, it doesn’t change her dilemma. She was still

faced with the prospect of sharing her news with her mother and her father and her fiancé, Joseph. Just imagine how scared she must have been. Would they still love her? Would they still support her? In a culture where adultery was severely punished, Mary had reason to worry.

Leonard Cohen expresses a similar concern in the song, *Amen*. But, in this case, Cohen is not talking to his parents. In fact, at the beginning of the song it seems as if he could be talking to a lover, a partner that he has disappointed.

When I'm clean and I'm sober
Tell me again
When I've seen through the horror
Tell me again
Tell me over and over
Tell me that you want me then

It's not clear what has happened. With the line about sobriety, it might be connected to alcohol or drugs. The word "horror" indicates that there may have been some terrible upheaval in their lives. But the insecurity and the questioning are the same, "Tell me again; tell me over and over; tell me that you want me then." The song is expressing a basic need that exists in each one of us, the need to be wanted, to be loved, despite all the mistakes that we make, despite all the ways that we disappoint the ones we love, despite all the flaws that may exist in our character. We need to know that we are and will be forgiven.

Tell me again
When the victims are singing
And the Laws of Remorse are restored
Tell me again
That you know what I'm thinking
But vengeance belongs to the Lord
Tell me again

In this second verse Cohen seems to move beyond the individual to express a more communal sense of regret and even repentance. He speaks of victims that are singing... I couldn't help but be reminded of the recent #metoo hashtag and the deluge of women (and men) who are currently sharing their stories of sexual harassment and worse. Will the Laws of Remorse ever truly be restored in those situations? What of the innocent victims of war, of famine, or corporate greed? Who is it that needs to express their remorse, to beg for forgiveness in those situations? Is it some unknown "they" or is it us?

As the verses continue, it becomes clear to me that this song is not just one man's plea to a lover for forgiveness, but is rather, the world's plea to God for mercy. Cohen's images become more graphic, some might even say, apocalyptic. It seems that the "filth of the butcher" and the "Eye of the Camp" are references to Hitler and to the horror of the Nazi concentration camps. And Cohen is asking God, "Is it possible that the Ground of our Being can love humankind even when we allow events like the holocaust to take place?"

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I believe that even as Cohen is asking this question, he is also answering, "Yes." Cohen has written this song in the form of a prayer. Each chorus ends with the word, Amen, said over and over again. As Christians, we traditionally end our

prayers with this rather strange word. Some of us say it without really thinking about what it means. Some of us pronounce it differently. But the word Amen means “so be it.” It is an affirmation, an expression of faith that God will hear our prayer and respond.

I believe that this song is a rather long version of, “Mom, Dad, I’ve got something to tell you.” The only difference is that the Holy Mystery already knows. There is no need to explain all the details of our wrongdoings. The Essence of Love is just waiting for us to open our hearts to the possibility of grace. It doesn’t matter who we are or what mistakes we may have made, when we turn to God we will know the blessing of forgiveness and the gift of unconditional love. It may take time, there may be moments in meditation or prayer when, like Cohen, we say:

Tell me again
We’re alone and I’m listening
I’m listening so hard that it hurts
Tell me again

But eventually the silence will end and we will know yet again the blessing of God’s healing love. We will know the truth of God’s grace.

We know that this is true because just over two thousand years ago, a young woman named Mary got pregnant and gave birth to a little baby boy,

a boy who grew up and became a healer and a teacher and a leader,

a teenager who was filled with the love of the Holy Spirit, and

a man whose life and teachings we use as a model for how to live and

how to love and how to pray. A man who over and over again, said, “Yes, God, will love you then.” Amen.