

Of *Serial* and Mercy

How a podcast, a murder, and being wrong reveal God's mercy.

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

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Proper 25C | Luke 18:9-14

Serial, the most listened to podcast in history debuted two years ago. It was just the sort of unlikely cultural phenomenon to bring new people into a medium they didn't know existed. The podcast.

A radio show which doesn't need a radio. No FM or AM frequencies or radio carriers. All you need is a computer, a phone, or an iPod, which, of course is the device which gave it its name. *Podcast*.

And *Serial* became king of all podcasts because it sucked us into the story of a dead high school student and the criminal case against her ex-boyfriend.

As a piece of theater, *Serial* relied on this constant sense of "did he or didn't he?" That odd sensation present as we, in 2014 examined a case from 1999 through the eyes of the justice system. He isn't innocent until proven guilty anymore. He had his trial.

The question, always present was, this. In spite of all the evidence which should have exonerated him in 1999, can we definitively say he didn't do it?

Where Sarah Koenig, host and producer of *Serial* left us was essentially "I don't know."

After *Serial*.

Like millions of others, I was obsessed with *Serial* and its subject, Adnan Sayed. Even though this powerful and confusing story ended, the real story kept going. Because there was still a man in prison, serving a life sentence he probably shouldn't have gotten.

His case is the perfect storm, the kind which has to be taught in law schools. Partly because law students will know it and be intrigued by it. But also because it shows what happens when every part of a system we lean on to uphold justice fails to do so.

1. An incompetent defender.
2. A half-hearted investigation with several Brady violations.
3. Prosecutorial misconduct.
4. And the failure of evidence such as eyewitness testimony and cell phone records to give us the certainty the law demands.

Serial sparked thousands of personal investigators trying to track down the truth and a renewed legal effort.

This summer, a judge granted Sayed a new trial.

Now, I like the confluence of story and justice. But I'm not a true crime person. This isn't my thing. But this story is true and has real implications. For those caught up in the system and those whose work is the system.

A new scripted TV show, *Conviction* is covering this same territory. Like *Law & Order* after the conviction. They're looking into how solid the case actually is.

And as I watched the first episodes this week, thinking about this moment we're in the world, reflecting on the gospel,

I had a new thought.

About how hard it must be for the officers and prosecutors who think they have their guy. People who are right 99% of

the time. Are good public servants, do their work well and are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt the guy is guilty.

But the eyewitnesses lied. Or were coerced after 12 hours of interrogation. Or a got a deal from the DA. Maybe DNA. The coroner contaminated the evidence, as he did with a hundred other cases. Maybe the expert witness has you thinking you've got a match when it really isn't anything. Does it matter?

Convinced. Certain.

Do they fight it? Obviously they do. We see evidence in the system around appeals. Officers and lawyers are vigorous in defense of their convictions. And I think we want to be.

But if they're followers of Jesus and now have proof that the person they locked up is innocent, I want to know what they do. Do they go to their priest or pastor? Seek forgiveness, not for being wrong, but for the hate or certainty they were right? Do they ask God for forgiveness? For mercy?

This question is at the heart of the gospel, fleshed out in our parable this week. A parable with two familiar archetypes.

The Pharisee & the Tax Collector.

And we are so familiar with these two from the gospels, we may have a hard time digging into who they represent for us.

Because we know the script already. That Jesus keeps flipping it and reminding us to look at our world inversely, we might forget just how powerful a suggestion this is.

The Pharisee

A friend reminded me this week that the Pharisees, often taken for the goats of the gospel, were the most respected leaders of their day. Deeply spiritual, educated, honest, focused, compassionate, eager to teach and enthusiastic, they knew the Law; the Pharisees were the paragons of virtue. They were truly unassailable.

So let's not read the parable this morning as dealing with the people with whom Jesus argued. Let's think instead of the most holy people you know or can imagine. Martin Luther King or Billy Graham. Mother Theresa or Sister Theodore Guerin. Beautiful, holy people. Maybe your parents fit the bill. The most faithful people you can think of.

Tax Collector

And then take the tax collector. The one we are often implored to love and respect. These were the traitors and impure. The ones who compromised their values and were definitely deplorable. People of little faith, conviction, or respectability.

So let's take that person or group which are the biggest hypocrites and liars and cheaters, who never stand for anything. Or the ones who take advantage of other people, exploit the system, hate the worker and the powerful alike, and are deeply selfish. Take those people and stand them in for tax collector.

Do you have them?

"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

It's hard to be wrong. I hate it more than anything. I never want to be wrong. But

that's only half of the story. The Pharisee is too busy trying not to be wrong that he doesn't get it.

And the one who gets it is the one asking for mercy.

You know I love the justice angle. I love when Jesus flips the script and tries to get us to see that we are to love the one society would have us despise. Or maybe our own hearts bring it out. Fears. And maybe they deserve it.

The writer tells us that Jesus told this parable

"to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt".

So I know Jesus is talking to me.

I love people the way Jesus tells me to and I give of myself in all the right ways and I'm working to give a higher percentage of my income to the church. My word, Jesus is talking to me.

And it's far easier for me to imagine a random Samaritan doing the right thing than it is for me to think of that white supremacist I had as my tax collector being more humble than I am. More spiritually mature. More in touch with our need for mercy.

This isn't just head stuff. This is heart terrain, too. Not just who we've wronged and how, but who we belittle and treat like dirt. And where they are, in the dirt, of the dirt, they express that more holy posture where the woman washes Jesus's feet with her hair. And he washes the disciples from there. From the dirt.

It's hard for the self-righteous to hear the voice from the dirt. To realize they've been wrong. They aren't perfect. They aren't righteous. All this work is garbage if we don't find ourselves in the dirt, too. Begging.

This is a parable about needing mercy, not deserving it. And our own posture, not of certainty and rigidity but of mystery and humility. That our greatest gift isn't our wealth or power or certainty or the riches of a church. But the wisdom to beg for mercy.