

Epiphany 06 2019
February 17, 2019 :: Luke 6: 17-26
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“Points of Grace.”

As I was looking at today’s gospel reading, I was reminded of a couple of things I learned in seminary.

The first thing was that the *setting* of a story that appears in one of the gospels, can sometimes be as important as the *content* of that particular story. And so, for that reason, we were told to pay special attention when the same story showed up in different gospels, but had been placed in a different setting. Because those differences were often just as important as the similarities.

A great example of this is the story of the cleansing of the Temple. All four gospels describe how Jesus went into the Temple in Jerusalem, and overturned the tables of the money-changers, and drove out the animals that were being sold there. In other words, all four stories are similar in regard to their content. However, while Matthew, Mark and Luke place that story at the *end* of Jesus’ public ministry — during Holy Week

— John places the story right at the *beginning* of Jesus’ public ministry. The stories are the same, but the authors placed them at different points in Jesus’ ministry. And those differences are important, and we need to pay attention to them.

In our gospel reading, this morning, we heard a story that is also included in Matthew’s gospel. In Matthew, the story is known as the Sermon on the Mount. But in Luke’s gospel, that story is known as the Sermon on the Plain. The contents of the two stories are similar, but the settings are entirely different.

For example, Matthew begins his version of the story with Jesus *ascending* a nearby mountain. However, Luke begins his version of the story with Jesus *coming down* from a nearby mountain. And that naturally begs the question: “Why does Matthew have Jesus deliver his sermon atop a mountain, far above the people, while Luke has Jesus deliver his sermon at the base of the mountain, among the people?”

The short answer is that Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, and he was trying to help them see Jesus as a type of new Moses; that he’s not just your run-of-the-mill rabbi; that

he's larger than life; that he's someone who has been ordained by God to be a leader of the people. And just as Moses climbed Mt. Sinai, where he delivered the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel, Matthew has Jesus climb another mountain, where he will deliver his Sermon on the Mount to the people.

But Luke is writing to a different audience, to people with different needs and concerns; to people who may not even know who Moses is. But also, Luke doesn't need to elevate Jesus; through the elaborate stories that Luke included about the birth of Jesus, he's already established that Jesus is a very special person. Instead, what Luke needs, is to present Jesus *as a person just like us*. And so, Luke has Jesus *coming down* from the mountain, and standing in a place where he is level with the people.

In other words, in Luke, Jesus is enacting the *accessability* of God, and the *humility* of God, and a God *without pretense*. In Luke, Jesus is the living reminder that grace can come to us wherever we are. In Luke, Jesus comes to us *as one of us*, and he comes to us whenever and wherever we hurt.

The second thing I remember learning about in seminary, was something called *panentheism*. Most people have never of it. But you may have heard the term *pantheism*. Pantheism is the belief in many different gods. In pantheism, there is a god of this, and a god of that, a god of here, and a god of there. That's pantheism. However, in *panentheism*, there is only one God, but that God is *everywhere*, and in *everything*, and in every *person*. In *panentheism*, there is no place where God does not dwell; and, in fact, all of creation exists within God.

I've long believed that *panentheism* does a good job of describing this world of ours. That is, that there are an endless number of *places* where we can encounter God. And, what's more, we can encounter the grace of God through almost *anyone* we encounter. And what that means — and this is where things get exciting — each of us is, potentially, a source of divine grace for the people who encounter us.

About fifteen years ago, my wife Peggy was working as a teacher in a preschool. Some days were good, while others were much harder. During one particularly hard day, she had an encounter with a little girl in her class named Olivia. Olivia had

recently lost her grandmother, whom she loved very much, and Olivia was feeling pretty low. During a break in the activities, Peggy took Olivia aside, into the reading corner, where they sat on some big, comfy pillows, and Peggy began to read a book with Olivia. And as the pages turned, Olivia began to feel better and, before long, was leaning against Peggy. Soon, two other little girls, who apparently also needed some TLC, joined them, and the four of them lost themselves in the moment, and in the story.

When Peggy recounted this story to me, I said to her, “Sweetie, you were a point of grace for Olivia. You were a pool, a reservoir, of God’s grace for that little girl.” I think that my statement made her feel a little uncomfortable, but Peggy was simply doing what came naturally for her. And God used that moment — that natural inclination — in a powerful way.

In his book, *The Other Side of Silence: A Guide to Christian Meditation*, Morton Kelsey wrote the following:

“Jesus of Nazareth was the most ... down-to-earth of all the religious leaders the world

has known. He offered a way for the common people to encounter and experience God. His way was not just for the intellectuals or the full-time professionals or the particularly adept. It is for everyone ... Simple people and beginners can have a genuine encounter with God. It is a matter of learning to respond to the love of God, which Jesus offers us . . .” (p. 1).

The point, I think, of our reading from Luke’s gospel, and the point that Morton Kelsey was trying to make, is the fact that *all of us* can be points of grace in the world around us. *All of us* can be pools of God’s presence and love and peace; reservoirs just waiting to be poured out upon someone who is feeling empty, or sad, or hurt, or alone. All of us, if we simply take the time to notice, and if we simply have the courage to reach out with love and concern, can be the source of God’s grace to someone in need.

In other words, grace isn’t just God’s gift to us, but that grace can also be our gift to one another. Amen.