

Stories of Grace

Pentecost 2 - 6/6/10

Readings:

Luke 7: 11-17

For a long long time I lived under a cloud. A cloud that followed me into all of life's situations. It was there when I started school, it followed me to university and when I started work its shadow followed me as I worked as a social worker, ironically trying to dispel the very much darker clouds my clients sat under. And in true biblical fashion, my cloud had voice that spoke out of it. Words that occasionally still echo but without the power of previous years. The words: "You're not good enough!" Words that at times drove me relentlessly to prove, to I don't know who, that I was good enough and then at other times when I believed them to stop me in my tracks.

It was only when I listened to another voice from a cloud that I began to see myself a God sees me. Recorded in Luke's gospel the voice rang out from a mountain, "This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to him!" And as I listened to Christ message of grace and love I came to realize, that God through Jesus the Christ accepts me just I am, warts and all. You see Christ's way is all about grace, and if we accept that, there's no need to prove how good we are. (In fact I wonder if humanity's compulsion to prove how good we are is perhaps at the heart of our planet's problems today.)

So let me tell you three stories of grace that show what I mean. The first two from different traditions and the last from this morning's gospel.

A Turkish folk tale entitled "A Party for Coats" (in Stories for the Journey)
"You must hurry," friends cried to the Teacher as he rushed home from the fields. "The banquet at the home of Halil has already begun and you are late."

They're right, the Teacher thought, If I take the time to change clothes, I could miss the whole dinner. So instead of returning to his home he proceeded in his work clothes to the home of Halil the rich man.

When he arrive the servants at the door refused to allow him to enter because he was not dressed properly. Though he protested the servants stood firm.

Finally the Teacher walked to the home of a friend who lived nearby. He borrowed a nice coat and quickly returned to the party. He was immediately welcomed and was seated at the banquet table.

When the food was served, the Teacher began to spread it on his coat. He smeared his jacket with vegetables and poured the appetizer into his pocket. All the time he said loudly, "Eat dear dinner jacket, I hope you are enjoying the meal."

The rest of the guests were bemused by the Teacher's behaviour, until finally the host, Halil asked what he thought he was doing.

The Teacher quietly replied that when he had arrived in his work clothes he had been refused entrance. "It was only when I was accompanied by this fine coat that I was allowed to sit at the table." The Teacher concluded, "Naturally I assumed that it was the jacket, not me, that was invited to the banquet."

We worship a God in Christ Jesus who is neither interested in the cut of our clothes or our station in life but One who accepts us just as we are. That's grace!

The second story is attributed to the Jewish Talmud and also points to the graciousness of God. It's called "Abraham's Hospitality" (in Stories for the Journey)

The tent of Abraham and Sarah was constantly opened to strangers, for they both knew that hospitality was gift that came directly from God.

One day, Abraham invited an old man to join him for a meal. When they finished eating, the old man thanked his host for the kind gift. "You needn't thank me" Abraham assured him, "whatever I have given you, comes from the God of creation. Thank God."

"Why would I bother to thank your God when I have my own?" the old man said as he reached into his pack. He drew out a wooden idol and set it on the floor. "This is the god who I intend to thank for taking care of me."

Abraham was furious. "How dare you worship a god made with hands," he shouted, and threw the old man out of the tent. "I'm sorry that I ever wasted my hospitality on you," he concluded.

Before the old man was out of sight, Abraham heard a voice calling his name. "Yes Lord?" the patriarch asked.

"For eighty years I have protected and cared for the old man you just threw out of your tent. All this time, though he has given credit to his wooden idol, I have continued to claim him as my own. Although he knows no better, Abraham, you do. Now go, find the old man and bring him back. Make him welcome. You are to serve even those who do not understand that there is one God."

And Abraham once again obeyed God.

We worship a God in Christ Jesus who accepts us just as we are. Even when we are muddled in our thinking about God. That's grace! God's radical hospitality crosses all kinds of boundaries. Read the gospels and you see God's grace everywhere.

Like our Gospel story from Luke this morning. On the surface a miracle story. But in reality one of two stories in the seventh chapter of Luke that points to God's inclusive grace.

There's the story of a Roman Centurion, hardly a believer, but one who seeks healing for his slave despite claiming he is unworthy. God's grace comes to the centurion and his household despite their non belief.

And then there is the widow and her son, already dead and on his way to be buried. Jesus is not interested in religious niceties, rules of uncleanness, or even a request for help. He sees what is there, a widow twice cursed, no husband, no son to support her and hears the double intensity of her wailing. What is to become of her. He doesn't hesitate, his compassion leads him to touch the ritually unclean bier and the son comes to life. Jesus the vehicle of God's grace is neither interested in the widow's or boy's status nor their faith.

Compassion is his guide. Just as it is with all of us. Sometimes our grief makes us inarticulate, sometime we believe the voice that tells us we are not good enough. Sometimes we are not even sure what we believe. What is to become of us?

But know this, God's grace operates in all places and all times. It's not long involved statements of faith that we are called to believe and accept. Only God's grace, God's all inclusive love, lavished on us regardless of who we are and what we believe. It's not right thinking but right living that is required, and right living comes from responding to the love and compassion that we see in Christ Jesus.

It's knowing that, that leads me to live as God would have me live, giving lie to the cloud that would say, I'm not good enough.

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