

Reconciliation: Risks and Rewards

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

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Texts: Isaiah 40.21-31;
 Psalm 147.1-11, 20c;
 1 Corinthians 9.16-23;
 Mark 1.29-39

Last Sunday afternoon, Jes Kast-Keat was ordained right here. It was a beautiful celebration of her call and an opportunity for us to offer our blessing on her new ministry in New York City. Tom Boogaart was the preacher for the day. He did a wonderful job of reminding us during this season of Epiphany when we look for the light of God and wonder where God is manifest in the world that if you want to see the face of Jesus you will find it in the face of the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned, and the homeless. It was inspiring and convicting. I walked away as I do from many of the texts during this season with a strong sense of just how much God requires from us. And the texts for today are no exception.

Jesus is on the move in Mark's gospel teaching, healing, restoring the possessed, and proclaiming good news. As Paul considers this ministry of Christ, he feels a sense of obligation: "woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!"¹ Just think with me for a moment about the people, institutions and situations you know about that need healing or restoration. Consider who is sick and what is broken. Consider what it means to be deeply invested in bringing people together, standing against injustice, working for peace, or shedding light on the broken places of our own lives and in the wider world so that healing and reconciliation can occur. Then consider what we're up against as we try to bring reconciliation and justice to these broken places of our lives. Do you feel overwhelmed? Because I do. I can feel at times a strong sense of futility in bringing this kind of ministry up against the powers that be (however you would name those powers)?

¹ 1 Corinthians 9.16

I don't tend to be a paranoid person. I'm optimistic for the most part. But when I look at the influences in our culture; when I consider the typical attitudes in our community or the complexity of different viewpoints; when I am honest about the power of commercial interests and political ambition or consider the overwhelming instincts we all have for self-protection...well I can appreciate the prophet's assertion that in the face of all of these powers even youth will faint and be weary, and the young fall exhausted.

So where is the good news in the midst of all this unending need and demand? For the prophet it is in the assertion that God is the One who rules and governs the earth.² Walter Brueggemann is a wonderful Old Testament scholar who identifies two dynamics playing out in this text that hold a particular connection to contemporary dynamics today. Keep in mind that the text addresses Israel during the time of their exile in Babylon. The first dynamic was the overwhelming power that the Babylonians held over the lives of the Israelites. When you look for an equivalent power today it probably isn't a single entity like Babylon but instead the cultural influences I just named: the powerful influence of consumer interests, political ambitions, and the drive for material possessions. Those forces are "the powers that be" in our world today. The second dynamic was the sense of despair and dislocation that had overcome the people of God because of the futility of living under those powers. When you consider the world in which we live, feelings of despair and dislocation are rampant.³ The good news of this text from Isaiah is the invitation to recognize the transience of all human forms of power.

Every empire that has ever risen no matter how strong or how powerful has also fallen. Not so when it comes to the presence and power of God. "Have you not known? Have you not heard? ...It is God who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers....God brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing...Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the

² Isaiah 40.22

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 14.

Creator of the ends of the earth. God does not faint or grow weary.”⁴ The way out of despair is to remember that transience of human life; to remember how quickly things can change and to refuse to bow in awe to those who wield power for today. The way out of despair is to shift our gaze away from the powers that be and to stand in awe instead before the power and presence of God.

In the gospel Jesus demonstrates what life is like when the power of God is honored and fully present in human life. We are given a vision of what the world is supposed to be like; a world the way God intends for it to be. People who are sick and broken in mind or body or spirit are restored. They are restored when people close to them are attentive to their need. In the case of Simon’s mother-in-law, the word of her illness made its way to the disciples and to Jesus and in their responsiveness she was restored. Jesus came and took her hand and lifted her up. This is a meaningful phrase. *l* literally means he raised her up. Mark uses this same word when telling us that Jesus was *raised* from the dead. In this and in all of the healing stories of the gospel Jesus gives what Frederick Buechner calls a *vision of wholeness* in his book *The Longing for Home*: “No matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons us.”⁵

Both Isaiah and Matthew are meant to give us that kind of vision – a vision of wholeness. We are invited to live toward that vision today; to be the kind of place where people are noticed and where others come alongside them in their suffering and take their hand and lift them up. People around Jesus became fixated on what they saw as his unique capacity to heal the sick and restore the possessed and didn’t understand how he could come to one place – heal a few – and then move on. Jesus did this because it wasn’t some magical ability he possessed that he would then pass on to a favored few. He was demonstrating what the realm of God is to be like and then entrusting the vision of that realm to us to work out.

⁴ Excerpts from Isaiah 40.21-22 and Isaiah 40.28

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, 110.

We now are the ones entrusted with this vision. It's a beautiful thing to be a part of the healing and restoration that God is doing in someone's life. And it doesn't have to leave us exhausted and weary. What Jesus reveals in this passage is the importance of keeping two things clear: the source of our strength and the place that we hold. The source of our strength is the power of God at work in us. In order to share that power we need to receive that power: "in the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."⁶ Where do you find places for your spirit to be nurtured and restored? Where are the places; who are the people; what are the practices that fill you up with the Spirit of God so that you feel at home (no matter what the circumstances of your life) and have something to give when you encounter a person in need?

We have to remain clear about the source of our strength and about the place that we hold. What I mean is we have to recognize that God's work is accomplished when each one of us plays our part. I've got a part to play but I'm not going to play my part and your part and your part and your part, at least not without falling down exhausted. When the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Everyone is searching for you,"⁷ Jesus essentially said "Not my part." And he moved on to the part that was his to play.

I know that Paul seems to be offering a counterpoint here when he says, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."⁸ I don't know if any of you have ever tried to be all things to all people...it's exhausting. I know from whence I speak. I've been wondering if we could hear this word from Paul in a different light.

When I listen to this word from Corinthians in light of the other texts for today, what I hear is the life-giving and healing power of acknowledgement and recognition. It's not about trying to please everyone all the time or trying to live up to every expectation and assumption people make. It's about meeting people exactly where they are and acknowledging a person's suffering and recognizing in each other our shared humanity.

⁶ Mark 1.35

⁷ Mark 1.37

⁸ 1 Corinthians 9.22

What if you could hear this passage from Paul this way: Paul says, “You feel weak? I know what it is to feel weak.” “You live under the law?” Paul says, “I know what it is to live under the weight of the law.” You don’t even have to share the precise experience of another person to recognize that what they are going through is part of the human condition and something we all share.

When we acknowledge each other in this way and turn our attention together toward the power and presence of God to bring healing and new life, then we can share in something else as well. It’s not just human suffering that unites us. We can share in the fact that God delights and finds joy in each one of us. And here’s the fantastic news (not just *good* news but *fantastic* news): God’s delight in us is not dependent on what we accomplish! This is the place where the gospel is so counter to our culture. God delights, the Psalmist says, not in strength or speed. God’s pleasure is in those who give reverence and awe to God and whose hope is in the steadfast love of the Lord.⁹

The reason God takes pleasure in our worship and our hope is not because God is a megalomaniac who needs to be adored but because God understands that is where our freedom lies. When we stand in awe of God we no longer bow down in awe to the powers that be. When we place our hope in God then, if only for that moment, we are no longer caught up in despair. God delights in our well being and encourages us to do the same for each other.

It’s a blessing to be a part of God’s realm; to be engaged in the work of reconciliation. I think that’s what Paul means when he says, “I have become all things to all people....I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”¹⁰ May that be our prayer as this season of reconciliation comes to a close: that we might discover not the demand but the blessings of sharing in the gospel.

Amen.

⁹ Psalm 147.10-11

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 9.23