

November 25, 2018



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The Message: "Splat!" Where is God?"

My family were on a weekend trip.

Saturday night, I am sitting at my desk with a snack, trying to come up with an illustration to begin my sermon. I have taken some advice to replace my office chair with a medicine ball. The phone rings at 9.15.

I got up a little fast; the ball moved. Suddenly I'm on my back, popcorn all over the floor and grape juice splattered over my white carpet. Splayed out like a crime victim, I mentally check my limbs to see if anything is broken – I seemed to hit every piece of furniture in the room as I went down.

I ask myself, lying on my back, 'where is God in this mess?'

As I scrubbed stain remover into grape juice blotches and picked up popcorn, I figured it out. God isn't in every situation. In fact often God appears to be hidden.

Ministers are often desperate to find just the right illustration. This was not my plan.

Where is God in all of this mess?

Sometimes we think we find God in the beauty of a sunset; sometimes in a relationship. And sometimes we can't seem to find God at all. In that moment, as I lay there, in my mind ready for the white chalk outline and the crime scene tape, I asked, 'where is God in all of this mess?'

And it is in those times that we should think of this parable of Jesus.

Now, this is one of the most famous parables of Jesus, but is not one of the all time favorites. That is, we love the parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Prodigal Son, but this parable about the sheep and the goats is more acidic, painful and stinging. This parable makes us feel more uncomfortable.

The setting of this parable was this: the disciples had asked Jesus, "What is it going to be like at the end of the world?" Jesus replied,

"It will be like this. A ruler will be up in heaven and all the people of the earth will gather around, and the ruler will divide the people into the sheep and the goats."

Now, if you were a disciple in those days, you understood this metaphor immediately. At night, when the shepherds came down from the hills into the valleys, they would divide the sheep for the sheep pen and the goats for the goat pen.

"The sheep will be on my right, and the ruler will say to them, 'Come into my party. I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was in prison and you visited me.'"

They said, 'When did we ever do these things for you?'

The ruler replied, 'Whenever you did these things for the littlest people, you did it for me.'

Then the ruler addressed the goats on the left. 'Depart from me into eternal damnation. I was starving and you gave me no food. I was thirsty and you gave me no drink. I was a stranger and you did not welcome me. I was lacking clothing and you did not clothe me. I was in prison and you did not visit me.'

They said, 'Lord,

- if we only would have known it was you, we would have treated you differently.
- If we only had known your true identity, it would have made all the difference.
- If we had only known it was your face behind the face of the refugees;
- if we had only known it was your body in the infirmary;
- if we had only known it was your body starving in Yemen;
- if we had only known it was you, it would have made all the difference.'

Jesus said, "Not good enough."

One of the first lessons that grows out of this parable is the awareness that our God, the true God, the one God, who created the universe, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead; that our true God is a hidden God who hides most completely in the faces and places of suffering.

But the real lesson of this parable today is not that God is hidden, but rather that God invites us, you and me, to seek God. To seek God not in the beauty of sunsets or the bounty of nature; not to find God in the obvious places and conclude that there is a God. The real lesson of this parable is to seek God where God is to be found and God is to be found hiding behind the faces and places of suffering people.

Recently a reporter took the United Church to task for always looking to the places we have failed:

- Racism in the cover of the most recent Observer as experienced by our first black moderator, Wilbur Howard.
- Reflecting deeply on the ravages of the residential schools.

The reporter is critical of a church that looks to its flaws. BUT, that is where God is found, hidden in the stories of the suffering.

"for I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison..."

So I say to that reporter: 'Where else would we look for God?' And looking to our failures to see God in the past: that can only help us to look for God in the suffering today and tomorrow. And isn't that a better place to be than turning away, than covering up?? There are countless church officials who only wish they had seen God in the suffering, instead of covering for their friends.

God hides in the midst of suffering. No other God ends up on the cross. The place that our God hides is in

- the water of baptism,
- the bread and cup of communion,

but the primary place is in the cross.

When our God is crucified, our God is the most hidden. When our God is being crucified today, God is the most hidden. Our God is a hidden God.

That's why he was born a helpless baby.

And that helplessness, God immersed in helplessness, is the surest proof for Christians that God understands our plight, that God is in the midst of us, present with us, and cares for us.

This story is an invitation for us to embrace a suffering humanity, just as Jesus did.

When Jesus addressed the sheep about going to heaven, the sheep didn't even realize that they had been generous. They were not even aware. That is the way it is with love, the true love of God. You yourself forget yourself in loving and caring for another person. And then God is found in you too.

Back to the crime scene I started with. The answer to the question, "Where is God?" is sometimes, "not here!" And that means we have to pick our bruised and dazed selves up, shake ourselves off, and embrace the hope to which God has called us. Recognise Christ in friend and stranger, and as Christ has been gracious to you, so be gracious to those in need.

As we end the Christian year and turn to the anticipation of Advent, may God give you a place of rest on rich pasture; may Christ Jesus be the shepherd who binds your wounds; and may the Holy spirit give you wisdom and reveal to you the presence of Christ in the suffering you are called to serve.

Go in peace to love and serve the one who yearns for you in the suffering of humanity.