

Little Stories of God's Mercy

- 16th Sunday, Ordinary Time
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Sometimes it is helpful, in order to understand a gospel, to ask why was this event remembered, retold, dwelt on by an early Christian community, written down, preserved, and found its way into a gospel. After all, one writer says that if everything about Jesus were recounted there would not be enough books in the world to contain all of it. So why this gospel?

The disciples come back from having been sent out by Jesus to heal, to cast out demons, to proclaim the kingdom. They gather back and report to him all they have done and taught. Can you imagine this reporting in to the boss: one, after another “Can you top this!?”--demons flying, lepers cleansed, cripples walking, people in awe, praising God. “Enough”, says Jesus, “Come away with me, away from the crowds, rest awhile.” Or was the original remark of Jesus to these bragging, one-upping disciples more likely, “Give it a rest!”? Is that why this little event was remembered? I don't think so.

They go off by themselves with Jesus in a boat to a shore of the lake which they know is deserted, probably for a picnic. So far so good. But the people figure out where they are going, signal and call to one another, so that when Jesus and his disciples come to the usually empty shore, there is instead a vast crowd there. Could this be why the event was remembered and retold, the power of Jesus to draw crowds? Not quite, but getting closer.

The story continues and concludes. When Jesus saw the vast crowd, “his heart was moved with pity for them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things”. Here is why the event was remembered and became gospel, because it was a little event which was like a window into all that Jesus was about in all he did, taught, in why he died, and in who he is. It is a window into his pity on people who are lost for lack of direction, compassion for those deprived of meaning, mercy for those helpless and abandoned: sheep without a shepherd. It is gospel because it lights up the whole of the gospel, every single bit of it. It is the gospel within the Gospel. Compassion trumps competition; taking pity trumps rest and relaxation; mercy trumps all accomplishments, work and self-concern. There is the window into Jesus and into the God he makes known. Is there anything Jesus did, or how he died, or risen is now for us, which does not issue from the fountainhead of compassion or mercy, from the fountainhead of the Father? We can even say that Jesus learned gradually that he was the Messiah from how the compassion of God was made manifest powerfully in and through him, how he experienced God was fulfilling the promise of the Kingdom of Compassion in him. Our gospel, our Christ, our God, our faith, our church is all about and flows from compassion. Three little stories.

I once had the privilege of taking a semester course in Rome from Henri Nouwen on compassion. He told in that course the story that once, having taught at Yale, he had a sabbatical year. He teamed up with a professor from Notre Dame and they discussed between themselves what would be a scholarly subject worthy of their joint sabbatical. Quite contrary to the usual

topics of academia, they determined they would spend a year researching “compassion”. Among other things, they decided to interview significant leaders. This took them to Washington, D.C., and to an appointment with then Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. They walked into his office and sat down as he remained behind his desk. Senator Humphrey said, “How can I help you?” Henri said in reply, “We’ve come to ask you, what is compassion?” The senator was taken back by a most unusual question in a congressional office. He got up from behind his desk, came around, and sat with them. He then picked up a #2 pencil and said, “In our country the whole lead and yellow length of this pencil is competition. Then at the very end of it we have this little eraser, and that in our country is compassion. Ours is not a country based on compassion but rather in its length and breadth is based on competition. But when we smear, blot, mess up things and people with our competition, we turn it around and, with this little fixer-up of what we have messed up, we tidy things with compassion. What a stunning story and example, however dramatized it may be, to make a point. Among us—unlike in the gospel—competition trumps compassion. Compassion becomes an after-thought, a remediation. That’s a good little story for showing the true significance of today’s gospel.

Another story, this one closer to home. Pope Francis repeatedly tells a story which he says was the source of his whole life’s vocation and spirituality, its fountainhead. When he was seventeen, heading one day to the train in Buenos Aires for his school’s annual picnic, and thinking of proposing to a girlfriend at the picnic, he passed by the local church and decided to pop in to say a prayer. There he met a young, very friendly priest whom he had not known before. He decided to go to confession to him. Something happened in that confession which Pope Francis describes as an encounter with God who had been waiting for him. In the encounter he experienced unmistakably and powerfully the mercy of God for him and for all people. He knew from that experience that the only meaning his life could have would be to show to all the mercy of God. He was converted. He was called. He discovered a special vocation of mercy. He later found the Jesuits. He did not go to the train and to the picnic. He did not propose to his girlfriend. His life was changed. Because of that experience 61 years ago he adopted the motto as archbishop, cardinal, and pope “*miserando atque eligendo*” which would be translated “having been shown mercy and therefore chosen to show mercy”. As our little gospel story about pity, compassion, or mercy is a window into what Jesus was and is all about, so this little story of the seventeen year old Jorge Mario Bergoglio is a window into the whole of his life and all he is about. He may have been elected pope in a spring in Rome by a conclave of cardinals, but just as truly he was elected as the pope we know by God in a spring in Buenos Aires. That too is a good story for our little gospel today about how mercy trumps all.

The last little story is, of course, our own little story. Our stories are little in the grand scheme of things and of eras and of humanity. But each of us does have a little story. We may not have been blessed and chosen by some unmistakable personal manifestation of God’s very nature as merciful and compassionate when we were in the springtime of our lives. But since our gospel is true, we all live always by faith within the mercy of God. Our “Bergoglio encounter” with the God who awaits us may be at the springtime of our next new life in God. Cardinal Basil Hume says it best in one sentence that I never forget. He says about our encounter with God beyond death, “Judgement is whispering into the ear of a merciful and compassionate God the story of my life as I have never been able to tell anyone.” Our full little story can only be told, whispered because it may seem small, to God who is compassionate enough for us to tell it all, because we

know it for the first time in its truth in the mirror of God's mercy. This, I hold, is the best of these three little stories, a story to live, and die, and live again by a window onto our true life.

So let's give it a rest and today let Jesus the shepherd show his mercy to us and to the rest of the crowd. We'll know what to do with that.