

“Making Room”

Genesis 15: 1 – 12, 17 – 18                      Luke 13: 31 – 35

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February 28, 2010

There are times when I look at a passage of Scripture and I know immediately what I want to say about it in a sermon. Unfortunately, that does not happen every time, like with today’s reading, for example. Nevertheless, the show must go on. So, here are some thoughts that I hope will be useful.

From an historical perspective, we know that the final episodes of Jesus journey happened at Jerusalem. This particular passage that we read today happens much earlier in his ministry, so one layer of meaning is like an Arnold Schwarzenegger line: “I’ll be back”. And we know that when Jesus comes back to Jerusalem the final conflict will then play out. In addition, Jesus has some painful and challenging things to say to and for Jerusalem. First of all, he says that Jerusalem will kill him like it has so many other prophets. He also says that he has this warm desire “to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” We get the feeling of intense passion and darkness, of a divine love that will not be received. So why is it that Jerusalem cannot accept what is offered? That is the question I want to explore, and I want us to find out if there is any of what I call the “Spirit of Jerusalem” in us.

Is there something particular or unique about Jerusalem? What is it about this city, or perhaps any city that sets up the conflict around love and death?

First of all, we must realize that the reference to the city is not primarily about architecture or density of population. It is more that particular attitudes of life are typified by the city but those attitudes can be carried by anyone, no matter what their zip code. We might also consider what is the opposite of the “spirit of the city” (to say it more generally). Not all of the story of the Israelites took place in cities. One of the most important stories in the Bible took place when the Israelites were in the wilderness, that is to say, between cities. They had come from the cities in Egypt where they had been in bondage. While in the wilderness, they began dreaming of the Promised Land where they hoped to build their own cities, where they could be in control. It is my belief that the move back into a “city way of thinking” sowed the seeds for their eventual downfall.

I am an avid reader of history and historical fiction. As you know, I’ve even tried my hand at writing some semi-historical fiction. I have a deep interest in discovering what motivates people, what divides people, and what has led to the incredible amounts of cruelty and violence throughout at least the recorded history of humankind. I have come to the conclusion that we as a species have not yet figured out how to have power without being controlled by it and without sacrificing our moral foundations to it. I have come to believe that power is the root of all addictive processes and that it always promises much more than it can ever deliver. Because we fill ourselves up with so much that cannot satisfy, there is no room or motivation to take in whatever can really meet our deepest spiritual needs. For forty years in the wilderness, the people dreamed of the Promised Land, but the content of their dream was still determined by

their experience in Egypt. When they got there, it did not take them long to create a society that replicated many of the same oppressive features that had gotten them in trouble in Egypt.

Let me explain. When people are in a physical or metaphorical wilderness, they are much more in touch with their need for a real and deep connectedness with their surroundings and with the divine. Furthermore, they must work together in order to survive. In the city, survival is not the issue, prospering is. Prosperity always has victims, however. The prosperity of some is dependent on the poverty of others. In this country, we are taught to “get ahead” in the world. We are taught that we should be better, more powerful, and richer than others. In Egypt, the prosperity of the Israelites caused them to lose their covenantal relationship with God and they ended up in bondage. In the wilderness, they rediscovered the divine relationship out of necessity. But even there, they dreamed of the day when they could be restored to power. Jerusalem is the physical symbol of that power, and anyone, even the Messiah, will be punished or eliminated if they challenge or threaten that power.

Jesus consistently offers a quality of loving relationship with God that is not dependent on material or spiritual prosperity. He preaches in favor of broadly based connectedness, like when he refers to the lilies of the field, made naturally beautiful by God. Jesus might also have reminded his hearers that in addition to not having to toil, the lilies do not have to aspire to being better or more powerful than any other life form. They are delighted to be who they are, and they are content to receive the freely given blessings of God.

Jesus, as one who apparently knows the will of God so intimately, wants the children of Jerusalem to receive such love. However, in the “spirit of the city”, Jerusalem is not willing to give up the status and power necessary to create space for love to come in. This is his great lament to the city. There is so much love available for you, but you are not willing to create the space necessary to accommodate it.

I think, perhaps, we are getting some perspective on Jesus message to Jerusalem, but we still have to determine what, if anything, it has to do with us. How much and in what ways are we affected by the “spirit of the city”? How much do we depend on our own goodness, or our treasures, or our own power to keep us safe? If we answer that last question just with regard to ourselves or our immediate families, we might conclude that we don't depend on those things very much. So let's look from a wider perspective. What do we expect of our country or our government? Do we want them to be strong, superior, and rich on our behalf? Do we want our system to be the undaunted champion of justice for all people, or do we get caught up in wanting the government to take care of us, and, as the saying goes: “The devil take the hindmost”? These are very important questions. It is not enough for us to be good people if “the spirit of the city” runs the country, or runs the business of the world.

Returning to Jesus and his eventual conflict within and with Jerusalem, he was in danger of death because of the political implications of his message. He represented a direct challenge to power, influence, and status. He directed people's attention instead to their relationships and to the loving presence of God in their lives. At the same time, he directed their attention to the plight of the poor and disenfranchised. He made it clear that whatever prosperity they had came at the

expense of the poor, and that their prosperity and power inhibited their ability to experience God directly.

This is where the message of Jesus applies to us most directly. We are good people, just as those in Jerusalem were good people. But to the degree that we rely on our own prosperity, we inhibit our ability to experience God more deeply.

A couple of years ago at Ecovillage (where I live) we invited Jim Merkel, the author of a book entitled, Radical Simplicity to lead some workshops. What he taught us was, first of all, that we as a race of humans have reached the point where we are consuming the world's resources, land, water, etc. faster than the planet can replenish them. Secondly, he taught us to think about how much resource we use as individual households and then compare it with the poorest nations. To give some perspective, just in terms of land, the world average usage is about 5 acres needed to sustain one person. In this country, we average 24 acres of used resources per person. At those rates, there is not enough for everyone and ultimately, we will all suffer. If we are going to follow Jesus' commands to love our neighbors and to feed his sheep, we must look honestly at these figures. It makes us uncomfortable to look because we have to face not only our relative affluence, but its impact on the world's poor as well. By the way, the poorest among us in this country are rich compared to 80% of the world's population. And furthermore, what we have does not necessarily help us live more meaningful lives.

This is the kind of message that Jesus brought to Jerusalem and that he brings to us. He wants us to be free enough to experience God more deeply and he tells us that what we hold onto the strongest gets in the way of that relationship. To be willing to receive the love of God requires that we let go, that we not let our fear dictate to us, that we relate to one another honestly and deeply, and that we trust in God's abiding care for our well being.

It's a challenging task, but we can do it with God's help.