



“You Have to Be There”

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Part of our challenge in trying to understand the Bible in modern times is that the Bible is comprised of many types of literature, gathered over two millennia (2000 BC to 200 AD), from four major cultures (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and Roman), of which we 21st Century people will never have direct experience.

In common parlance, we might say, “To fully understand the Bible, you had to be there.” And the fact of the matter is—we weren’t.

If we did have such experience, we would be older than Methuselah and have a cultural heritage more diverse than Barak Obama’s.

Barak Obama, as you may know is a member of the United Church of Christ. His home congregation is Trinity Church in Chicago, Illinois. It’s the largest UCC congregation in our denomination.

Yesterday, I caught the CNN coverage of Obama’s official announcement that he’s running for President, and the thought occurred to me that there are some great parallels between the way a person—especially a populist candidate like Obama—announces his run for the Presidency and the way that Jesus is depicted in Luke’s account of the “Sermon on the Plain.”

For example, both characters draw together their supporters, separate themselves from the “old order” of leadership, go to some proverbial “mountain top” to choose the people who will become part of their inner circle, and then come down from the mountain to meet their public in a pedestrian venue—where everything about their inaugural-like speech is a symbol for their vision of how life ought to be and where they intend to lead their followers.

Now, despite how excited I am that a member of our United Church of Christ is running for President, and regardless of what I think of his campaign or his positions on the issues, today's sermon is about Jesus and his inaugural address in Luke, and not about Barak Obama's run for the White House. So let us leave the scene in front of the old Illinois Statehouse in Springfield, and turn now to the setting of Jesus' Sermon on the Plain in the 6th chapter of Luke's gospel, and try to discover as much as we can about the historical and theological significance of this setting and message, and what its spiritual significance may mean for us today.

II

Generally speaking, Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" is about "being there"—about being present, about showing up in life with our whole selves, and offering a ministry of presence to others. Even if we weren't there 2000 years ago, there are tools that can help us better understand the context and we can glean the spiritual wisdom from the experiences of our forebears.

The discoveries of modern biblical scholarship help us begin to understand, for example, that Jesus' blessings and woes were pronouncements, that the geography in Luke had theological significance, and that Luke—in the spirit of the Hebrew prophets—saw the Messiah turning the world upside down. Let's explore each of these points briefly.

1. **Jesus' blessings and woes were pronouncements.** They were statements which, once uttered, began the process of divine fulfillment. What he said was already unfolding, and would ultimately prevail. When Jesus said, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," he was pronouncing that the poor already had their visas for the Kingdom.
2. In Luke, **geography bears tremendous theological significance.** Note the setting for today's gospel reading—it's on the plain. After healing several people from various maladies, Jesus went up the mountain to pray and called the 12 to be in his inner circle. Then they descended the mountain, and they came down to the plain to be literally and figuratively on the same level as the people with whom they were ministering.
3. In Luke, Jesus describes a **great reversal of things** in that the beatitudes (the blessings) are quickly followed by the woes (the curses) in which Jesus describes, in manner similar to the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55), a reversal of the social and economic order of his day and announces the downfall of those who have beforehand enjoyed all the perks.

Each of the three insights from scholarly resources is helpful in deepening our understanding of the text. To grasp the spiritual wisdom inherent in the passage, we need to go deeper. One way to do so is to bring our imagination to bear on the text. Through the gift of spiritual imagination, we come to experience Christ's healing presence in our lives, we hear his invitation to be fully present in the world, and we join him in this ministry of presence for others.

A. We experience Jesus' ministry of presence.

Let's imagine ourselves in this story, at the foot of the mountain with Jesus. Let's remember what we already know—that words matter—that they have the power to heal and to harm. Imagine that earlier today we sought out Jesus because we have been suffering with some malady that has diminished our health, that has been the reason we have been separated from our families and ostracized by our faith community, and that has caused us to slip into the quagmire of poverty.

So we bet our lives on the hope that Jesus can help us, and we use the last of our personal resources to find him. And when we finally meet Jesus, he looks into our eyes, and realizes that we are people—not a number or a disease—and he does not ask whether we are participants in his HMO, or his PPO, or how we will be covering our co-pay. Will it be cash or charge? No. He just says, "Bless you."

Then he asks, "How long have you been living with this issue, this disease, this dis-ease?" And we tell him our answer, and unlike well-meaning persons trained in customer service, who are trying to remember the next polite thing that they were taught to say in employee orientation, Jesus really listens to us, and he again says, "Bless you!"

And unlike those occasions when someone says "Bless you!" after we sneeze, we actually feel blessed by Jesus' words, because Jesus' very words heal us from all that harms us, and we become whole again.

Because we are whole again, we take up our pallets and walk. We return to our homes and families. We go back to work and start drawing a paycheck again. And we return to worship where we make an offering that is holy and acceptable to God, because our giving is inspired by gratitude rather than guilt, and we now bring our whole selves to the project of life, and we are now able to be fully present for others in their sorrow and their joy.

B. We receive Jesus' invitation to be wholly present.

Many of us have come to this place and time in our lives carrying a sense that only a part of us is welcome in the world. The part that we bring gladly and

the part that we hold back varies, depending on our life circumstances and personalities, but if we are like most people, we have learned to hold back part of ourselves because some part of us has been perceived as less beautiful, less important, and less acceptable.

Some of us, for example, came to believe at an early age that we weren't very smart. So convinced were we that we could not learn much or do well in school, we checked our brains at the door of life and we have not yet become all that God knew we could be.

Others grew up with a sense that the world was such a chaotic mess that it was best not to notice that we had feelings, or that if we could access our feelings, it would be best not to trust them, so we didn't, which is unfortunate because our emotional intelligence can be every bit as important and helpful in teaching us about the world as the knowledge that we gain from scientific facts and time-honored theories.

While some were taught to check our brains at the door, and others learned not to trust our feelings, some others of us were never encouraged to realize that we are spiritual beings, that we are creatures with souls, and that our relationships with the divine are naturally occurring, so that they benefit from nourishment and opportunities for expression—just as our psyches, our bodies, and our minds hunger for emotional, physical, and intellectual nurture.

Others of us, by contrast, were taught about faith and doctrine, but then the natural inclinations of our spiritual selves were bound up in doctrine and ritual or traditions that we would never have chosen for ourselves—had we known that there was a choice—and so we threw “the baby” (our spirituality) out with the bathwater (institutional religion as we previously had known it) as soon as we were out from under the thumb of the well-meaning people who raised us in those bathwater traditions that crushed rather than nourished our souls.

But wait, there's good news. God is still speaking and we are not dead yet. We are now grown-up spiritual beings who can make choices about how we will love God and those with whom we will share the faith journey, and as we make these choices and share this journey with our church family of choice, we experience some of the healing that Jesus was preaching about on the plain, and we are moved to help others hear and experience this good news—and one of the ways is by being present with others.

C. We accept Jesus' call to a ministry of presence with others.

So, now that we have a keener sense of the importance of Jesus' presence in our lives, now that we have some sense that the world is not always hospitable to our whole selves or the continuum of human spiritualities, we have de-

veloped a sense of empathy for others who suffer in some way. We have empathy for the poor, the hungry, the bereaved, and the persecuted.

Passages like the Sermon on the Plain have inspired many empathetic Christians to found and participate in social justice ministries that ameliorate the suffering of others, if not literally turn their worlds upside down, through a ministry of service which begins most authentically with a ministry of presence. In the UCC we have come to understand that such a ministry is reciprocal and not just one-way, not just what the privileged do for the under privileged.

On September 11, 2001 the Rev. Dr. James Vijayakumar (“Vijay”), our Executive for Southern Asia, was on a mission trip to North India, where he toured the schools and hospitals founded by our forbears. Much to the surprise of many in the US, a few days after the plane crashes in NYC, DC, and Pennsylvania, Vijay arrived at a Buddhist seminary full of monks and lay people who had been praying 24 hours a day for the many victims of the tragedy since they had heard about it, and that the students in a UCC-related school for poor girls had taken up an offering to send with Vijay for disaster response work in the US.

Though the power and importance of presence is well understood in a nation like India where so many suffer egregious poverty, the ministry of presence is not always valued as much as material remedies are in the US. So we need to relearn and embrace the power of a ministry of presence, and recall that it can take many forms.

Visits to the ill, hospitalized, or homebound are commonly associated with this ministry. We visit and send cards and make calls, because health challenges often accompany spiritual challenges too, and because these hardships often separate us from our faith community. So, contact with persons in our circle of faith is an instrumental part of restoring wellbeing, along with medical, psychological, and economic interventions. This is why we are sending our Confirmation kids and their parents and advisors out to visit their “grandparents for a day” today.

Grief is another context for the ministry of presence. I learned about the importance of this ministry as a young child one morning when my sister and I were visiting our grandparents, and a neighbor of theirs was killed in a farm accident. The phone rang while we were weeding Grandma’s vegetable garden. Grandma ran for the house to take the call. She listened quietly for a while to all that was said by the caller. Then she hung up the receiver, said something in a hushed voice to us about an accident and a death, and shrunk onto the stepstool under the phone and put her head in her hands and she said a prayer—a prayer that we could not hear, but that I’m sure that God could hear. Then Grandma sent us upstairs to get cleaned up and to put on our Sunday best because we were going visiting.

Meanwhile Grandma bathed and put on her church clothes too, packaged up the dessert that she had made for supper that night, and loaded us into the family car and drove us to the neighbors' house where we sat in the parlor with about 20 other women and a bunch of children and grandchildren who, like us, were on their very best behavior, because we had never actually seen our mothers and grandmothers cry before. So, we knew that what had happened was big, and that even though few words were said, we learned that baking cakes and showing up was not only what death was about. It was what life was about.

IV

So this is what the Sermon on the Plain is all about. It's about Jesus meeting us where we are. It's about him being able to hear and comprehend the pain and suffering of persons in need—including persons like us. It's about receiving Jesus' invitation to be wholly present in life—and to show up big—wherever we are sent. And, it's about engaging in a ministry of presence for others—in death and in life.

In sum, to fully understand the gospel, we have to be there. God knows this truth, which is why God sent Jesus into the world to be present with us, and to show us how to carry out a ministry of presence in God's name.

God grant that we may be faithful to this high and holy calling. Amen.