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“Points of Grace”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
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Acts 9:1–20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11–14; John 21:1–19

How do we talk about encounters with the holy that profoundly alter our lives?

Some have referred to these experiences as *epiphanies*, or *ah-ha moments*,
or in the South, some label them as *come-to-Jesus moments*,
but I prefer to call them *points of grace*.

Saul, the Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, experiences a point of grace
on the road to Damascus when out of the blue, he is confronted
by a blinding flash of light that throws him to the ground,
by a voice that knows him and calls him by name,
and by an encounter with the risen Christ
that changes his relationship with regard to Christianity
from that of persecutor to that of proclaimer.

This happening is so important that Luke tells Paul's point-of-grace story three times
in Acts: here in the narrator's voice and twice more using Paul's own voice.

And Paul describes it himself in 1 Corinthians 15 in defense of his status
as a genuine apostle and of the validity of his teaching
in continuity with the apostolic witness.

Four times, then, the story is told of Paul's dramatic, life-altering encounter with the holy.

But Luke, the author of Acts, uses his narrative triad of the Damascus road episode
in a very different way than Paul himself uses it in 1 Corinthians.

Paul tells his own story, *looking backwards* with new eyes

to connect his experience of Jesus to that of the original disciples
who had been with Jesus in his pre-resurrection life, too.

But Luke tells Paul's story *looking forward* to Paul's integration into the mission of God
and into a future story scripted by God with Paul as God's chosen instrument,
"to bring the name of Jesus before the Gentiles and kings
and before the people of Israel,
and to suffer for the sake of Jesus' name." (Acts 9:15–16)

It's almost as if Saul/Paul falls or is pushed into the river of God's future story,
and once the scales have fallen from his eyes and he realizes that he can either
sink as a zealous persecutor or swim as an equally-zealous proclaimer,
he decides to swim in the living baptismal waters of God's mission.

As one of my West Virginia church members was fond of saying,

"Paul was borne along by the Holy Spirit," allowing himself to be carried by its current.

I don't see this as a story of Paul's about-face from a life of moral morass
to a life of moral virtue, as much as I see it as Paul's assenting to
become a participant, warts and all, in God's mission to change the world for the better,
person by person, church by church, town by town, letter by letter,
through the power of the Holy Spirit.

He's not perfect once Jesus happens to him; he's still Saul/Paul, warts and all.

I don't even like Paul as a person particularly. I never have.

But he *is* perfectly engaged in the mission of God, using his keen mind and robust ego
to encounter people where they live, where they work,
and where they spend their time.

The Holy Spirit has been loosed in the books of Luke and Acts,
and the characters are playing catch up to the redemptive love
that is the flood tide of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and ascension.

And I want us to entertain the notion that the Holy Spirit is *still on the loose*,
confronting us in points of grace and calling us
to step, dive, or fall into the river of God's future story
as God's chosen instruments too, called to use our talents as God directs,
to heal and restore creation, and to bless all people as God's beloved ones.

If the original disciples could be surprised by resurrection,
then Paul and we later disciples can be just as surprised by God's
resurrecting and redirecting points of grace.

Primitive folk artist Albert Wagner called his own point of grace the "Miracle at Midnight."
His happened on the night of his fiftieth birthday

as he descended the basement steps to retrieve something for his birthday party,
and he noticed an old board on the floor with drips of paint on it.

The beauty of the colors reminded him of his boyhood fascination

with making things with his hands, and of his mother who used to say to him,
"Son, if I could send you to art school, you could be somebody."

"That old hunk of wood just started talkin' to me," Wagner said.

Wagner claims God "spoke" to him through that blotted floorboard and told him
that from that moment on, painting would offer him salvation.

So that night, he began working with the images that appeared in the wood,

and the result was a furiously expressionistic piece he called "Miracle at Midnight."

"All my life, I wanted to paint." Wagner said. "I just didn't know how.

But, God gives directions and you have to follow them."

(<http://www.onbadcat.net/TheMan.shtml>)

Up to that moment, Wagner had been mired in a deadly mix of sex, wine and women.

He had married the love of his life, Magnolia, who bore him 15 children,

but he also secretly supported two other households and five additional children.

When Magnolia found out about the other families, she left him after 20 years of marriage.

Wagner suffered greatly for the rest of his life from this loss.

Like Paul's holy encounter, aligning oneself with God's mission does not
come without great suffering.

But after the epiphany of that old hunk of wood, Wagner sold his moving business,

gave up his destructive habits, became an ordained minister, and devoted himself
as a full-time artist and family man.

His home in a rough, crack-infested neighborhood of East Cleveland, Ohio became
both a museum for his artwork and a sanctuary for his ministry.

Its purple façade with multi-colored embellishments

and the phrases "Come home, Ethiopia" and "Jesus Loves You" emblazoned
across the front identified the studio where

Wagner created over 3,000 "outsider art" or "untrained" paintings and sculptures

for 32 years of his later life until his death in 2006 at age 82.

He is often referred to as the Black Moses of East Cleveland

because he believed that God had promised to lead his people to freedom
and miraculously parted the Red Sea, opening a new pathway to our future.

I want to say that Wagner experienced a point of grace in that talking hunk of floorboard

where God met him and allowed him to see himself in a new light,

bringing forth the "true colors" literally, of what Wagner was meant
to be and to do.

Wagner's life history coalesced in that moment, and if I were using Jesus language,

I would say that this point of grace was a wheat and weeds moment for him
when God handed him the weed-whacker and said, "Get to work!"

And thus, a mission and a ministry aligned with God's purposes emerged for Albert Wagner.

He wasn't morally perfect after his point of grace. His wife never returned to him.

Some doubted his ministry as a scam.

But in a documentary film based on his life, he shared his philosophy over and over:

"Be aware of the past, face your mistakes, don't blame others,
move forward towards a better time, believe and dream."

(Blue Greenberg. *The Herald Sun*. The 'real deal' at Outsiders Art Gallery," 2/21/13)

Another point of grace story comes from Sara Miles,

an atheist, lesbian, bistro-cook, pot-banger,

and left-wing journalist who had covered revolutions around the world,

and whose book, *Take This Bread*, we have been reading

in two church study groups this spring.

Early one winter morning, as Miles tells it, she walked into St. Gregory's Episcopal

Church in San Francisco, for no earthly reason other than a reporter's

habitual curiosity.

She didn't even know what *episcopal* meant, or that Episcopalians were part of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

But, she walked in, took a chair, sat down, stood up, sang, waited and listened, stood up and sang some more, and heard the words,

“Jesus invites everyone to his table”.

“And then we gathered around that table,” she says,

“and there was more singing and standing, and someone was putting a piece of fresh, crumbly bread in my hands, saying 'the body of Christ,' and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying 'the blood of Christ,' and then something outrageous and terrifying happened.

Jesus happened to me.”

(Sara Miles. *Take This Bread*, p. 58)

Miles says she felt as if she had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over from behind.

There was a disconnect at that moment between what she thought was happening—eating a piece of bread—and what she knew was happening:

God, named “Christ” or “Jesus,” was real and rolling around in her mouth.

And from that moment on for Miles, that impossible word, Jesus, lodged in her like a crumb... literally.

The word, she says, was indisputably in her body, as if she'd swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive her own flesh. (Miles, p. 59)

I want to say that Miles, also, experienced a point of grace in this moment of chewing on the Word made Flesh.

Her life history coalesced for Sara at this moment: all the years of sitting around campfires with third world revolutionaries, all the sweaty hours spent slinging hash in steamy eateries, all the sweet meals offered by perfect strangers she'd met as she traveled to write about far-away places.

And as she explained it, it was about tasting and seeing.

It was if the Jesus who was lodged in her throat like a crumb was resonating from within her body with this question: Now that you've taken the bread,

what are you going to do ? (Miles, *Take This Bread*, p. 97)

And so Sara Miles began a ministry of radical hospitality to those outside
the walls of St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco.

She opened the church up every Saturday, brought in fresh food from
the San Francisco Food Bank, and gave bags and bags of it away to anyone who
arrived at the door hungry, without question, without conditions,
without faith expectations... just because.

Here is how she describes what began to happen at St. Gregory's.

"I'd unlock the church gate in the late morning. By noon, a huge truck
from the San Francisco Food Bank would arrive with shrink-wrapped pallets of food,
as much as three tons of it.

We unloaded the pallets, set up a ring of tables right around the altar,
and turned the rotunda into a big, messy farmers' market
with piles of vegetables and stacks of bread spilling under the icons
and next to the silver crosses...

We set up a table outside, to greet people and check them in,
entering their names in a big book. 'There's always this look...
when you tell newcomers they don't need ID, I just want to know their name.'

We'd hand each person a number, in random order, and a snack;
another volunteer would call out numbers and, ten at a time,
people would come in to pick out their food.

We lit candles and put an icon at the door, serving everyone who come without exception,
just as we did during the Eucharist." (Sara Miles. *Take This Bread*, p. 125-126)

And thus a mission and a ministry aligned with God's purposes unfolded for Sara Miles.

Have you ever experienced a point of grace?

Have you ever stepped, dived, fallen or been pushed into the river of God's future story?

Has something like scales ever fallen from your eyes as you have begun to
see differently your role in God's story of redemptive love and mercy?

I see how some of you have fallen into the river of God and are swimming frantically:
having adopted children to make new configurations of God families;

having taken on jobs that are more demanding than is doable
to bring health and healing to all of God's children;
having stayed in jobs that are uncomfortable for you now, but that
you feel called to see through to the end until goodness prevails;
having experienced unimaginable tragedy, but having found it to be
the gateway to something unimaginably beautiful;
having opted to step into retirement and possible new uses of your gifts;
having started new fledgling ventures that are noble, but run on a shoe string.
I see how some of you have fallen into the river of God and are swimming frantically,
and I love you for taking that leap and that risk.

Author Reggie McNeal says this in his book, *Missional Renaissance*:

"The missional church is an expression of God's heart.

It serves as an indication of God's continuing commitment
to his redemptive mission in the world.

Because God is on mission, the people of God are, too. God is a sending God.

Just as he sent his Son and his Holy Spirit to the world,
he is sending his people into the world.

All sendings share the same redemptive mission.

The notion of 'sentness' lies at the heart of the missional church
because it reveals the heart of God.

(Reggie McNeal. *Missional Renaissance*, p. 20-21)

The Lord is risen!

The Lord is risen, indeed!

The risen Lord is alive and calling us and sending us,
throwing us and pushing us into God's redemptive mission in the world.

Thanks be to God for those who are open to points of grace,
who are open to being borne along by the Holy Spirit,
and who are swimming fast in the deep baptismal river of God's future story,
buoyed and buoyant because of God's grace and mercy. Amen.