

Grace Comes into the Gap

A Reflection for the Feast of St. Monica

1 Corinthians 1: 26-31

Consider your own calling, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were side by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so thus, as it is written, "Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord."

The Word of the Lord

On the Shore

As I stood drinking my coffee on the edge of the porch in the dark early this morning, all was wet out there - the grass, the garden, and the walnut trees... the air smelled of rain. It brought into my mind a story of another mother who also once got up in the early pre-dawn, a story about St. Monica, whose feast day it is today:

She didn't sleep well that night. Something didn't feel right. The sky was still dark when she rushed to the shore of the Mediterranean. The air smelled of the sea. She looked out over the waves. In her mind, she could still hear her son's voice from last night- "Wait for me, mother, I'm going to go into town to say goodbye to a friend. No worries. Stay the night. I'll see you in the morning." Yet there in the distance, his boat sailed away. She had asked him to stay in Africa. She had begged to go with him to Rome. Augustine later wrote, "For she loved my being with her, as mothers do, but much more than many." But he scoffed at her way of life and her gospel - it was too simple; it was a faith only for the backward and the uneducated. He had little use for her crucified and resurrected Jesus. His sophisticated philosophy had soared beyond that, and thus at that moment, he had little use for her. He left her behind in the night. Later on in his *Confessions*, he wrote, "I lied to my mother and such a mother..."

How did Monica feel as she stood on the edge of that water? We never do hear her words but the gap must have hurt. Did she feel the undertow pulling her heart under? Did she cry out, "My Son, my Son, why have you abandoned me?"

Dreams Drifting Away

In today's reading from the Corinthians, it feels like St. Paul may have once looked out over the Mediterranean and wondered about his Corinthian community. In a way, that community had sailed away and left him behind too. They were better than he was. At the time of the writing of his letter, he had preached unity in Jesus but they battled about who belonged to Apollos and who to Peter and who to Paul. He preached humility, but they burst with arrogance and boasting. The gap between his ideal and their reality must have hurt.

Maybe you and I, in some ways, stand on the edge with St. Monica and St. Paul? Stand with me on that beach. People close to us may have sailed off, through death and through distance. Dreams may have drifted out of sight. Expectations may have floated away.

Perhaps also standing on that beach with us is Jesus of Nazareth. He knew. The dark chasm of life – the gap between what could be and what is, the breach between love and abandonment, the space between hope and disappointment- at the moment of the cross, he took all of those betrayals, the sorrows, the human brokenness, and heartache – he took that heaviness onto himself and cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Can you feel his ache as we stand looking out at the sea together?

Can you hear the water gently lapping on the beach?

Can you smell the early morning air?

Into Your Hands

Yet even when his world was shattered, Jesus surrendered himself in trust. He said to his Father, “Into your hands, I commend my spirit.” Even in the destruction of death, he was sure in hope.

And as we all stand there together, you and me and Monica and Paul and Christ of the Cross, the sun begins to rise over the sea. An earthquake rumbles.

And as the sun comes up, Jesus looks into each of our eyes. He looks at Monica. He looks at Paul. He looks at you. He looks at me. And in that moment, his eyes ask, “Will you also go?” He gives us the choice to sail away. He offers us the option to choose the more sophisticated way. His hands open to us: you can choose to stay with me. You too can choose to go.

In that early dawn silence, he has one more thing to say. If you chose to stay, he says, “Let go.” He looks out at the sea, at all that has sailed away from us. “Let it go,” he says. Self-abandonment and self-surrender is the hardest task of our life. “Let go of all that you hold dear. Trust me,” he says.

In that moment on the beach, Augustine says about mother Monica: the “earthly part of her affection to me was chastened by that scourge of sorrows.”

Paul, that Pharisee of Pharisees, says there is no place for human pride in the presence of God. To boast is to boast in the Lord.

What about you and me? Not many of us are wise by human standards. Few of us are powerful people or born of royalty. Many of us are talented and capable though. Here on the beach, Jesus asks us to leave behind the “I can do it all by myself.” He invites us to hand over the compulsion to “have all under our own control,” He says to let go of the ships that have sailed away.

But what will happen if we let go?

The Grace in the Gap

The good news is that God’s grace comes into the gaps. Monica handed her son Augustine over and prayed and wept for him for nine more years before his conversion. There were times when she wanted to give up on him, disgusted by his way of life. In a dream, God gave her the strength to endure. Through her weakness and her willingness, the Lord recast her son’s earthly intelligence into a godly wisdom. The Christian faith would not have been the same without the devotion of Monica and the brilliance of Augustine.

We don’t know much about whether the Corinthians listened or floated away from the little tent maker from Tarsus. But Saint Paul still walks with us.

We may stand on the edge of a sea or a porch. We may ache about the gap between what could be and what is. Paul reminds us to stay with Jesus: Don’t sail away. We may be mere nothings, not clever by the world’s standards. This gospel of relationship is simple, maybe even thought backward and archaic by some, a clinging to the past, to the time before we had modern knowledge of how things work. But in Jesus is our wisdom; in him is our righteousness; in him, we are made holy and set free. He says, “Let it go. Follow me.”

We are not alone on the beach. We are loved. Monica and Paul and Augustine and the saints throughout the centuries stand with us, looking out at the situation in which we live. They know. And you and I, we, too, stand together. We are sure in hope, for the Holy Spirit helps us. Resurrection hope is not a simplistic wishing-that-all-would-be-right, but a deep-down-in-the-gut strength-in-the-soul kind of trust even though things go awry. For it is God who is trustworthy, into whose hands we commend our spirit. Grace comes into the gaps: the grace to endure, to persevere, to carry on. So when we boast, we boast of the Lord.

So let us pray together:

Lord, this morning, you have come to the seashore. You look in our eyes and you call us. You ask us to let go. It doesn't make a lot of earthly sense to trust you. Yet on us, you have set your heart. Let us sense your unfailing love, and walk with us this day and all days. We pray this through Christ our Lord, Amen.