



Holy Ground

By

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First Lesson | Romans 12:9-18

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Second Lesson | Exodus 3:1-15

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was

blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that

I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” He said, “I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

But Moses said to God, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I am has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’:

This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations

Sermon

It was 2:30 in the morning, and my alarm clock was going off: beep-beep-beep. I was asleep that night in a monastery in Egypt--the Monastery of Saint Catherine, at the foot of Mount Sinai, also known as Mount Horeb in our passage from

Exodus. I had graduated from college just a few weeks prior as a Religious Studies major. This was much to the chagrin of my parents (not the graduation part... the Religious Studies part, because what on earth would I do with that kind of degree). So, there I was, happily graduated and off to the Middle East with some of my closest friends on a college-sponsored Religious Studies seminar.

That 2:30 alarm went off in all of our rooms, and as tough as it is to get up in the middle of the night, we knew we were headed to holy ground. It had been our professor's idea: to climb Mt. Sinai in the night, in order to be at the top in time to see the sunrise. And when I say, “climb Mt. Sinai,” what I really mean is that we took camels two-thirds of the way up, and then we hiked the remaining third.

The sunrise was spectacular, and if that weren't enough, when we got back down the mountain, we found ourselves standing at none other than the site of the burning bush. As it turned out, Saint Catherine's Monastery had been built around that site 1,400 years earlier. Everywhere we turned, it seemed there were stories from the Bible leaping right out of the ground at us, beckoning us to

remember the God of our ancestors and faithful followers such as Moses.

In our story, Moses is tending some flocks, moving with them over the countryside, when suddenly there's an angel and a burning bush. It's all so amazing that Moses turns to try and get a better look. God calls to him: "Moses, Moses!" And Moses says, "Here I am." God instructs him: "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place upon which you are standing is holy ground." God then says, I am the God of your ancestors; I have heard the cries of the people, and I have come to deliver them out of bondage to a land flowing with milk and honey. And I need you, Moses, to go to Pharaoh and bring my people out. Moses raises some questions, understandably, but God assures him: I will be with you, and you will tell the people who I am. I am who I am, for all generations.

Because Moses accepts God's call to deliver the people, the course of history is changed. The Hebrew people make their way out of Egypt, Pharaoh's army drowns in the Red Sea, and the people do finally, after years of wandering in the wilderness, make it to the promised land.

What I find even more compelling than the way God shows up to Moses is the way that Moses responds. He could have taken one look at that burning bush, or the angel, and marched those sheep right back to Midian. He could have said to God, "You've got to be kidding me." Instead, he considers God's invitation. He's on the run from Pharaoh after all; he's in Midian hiding out. And I think he knows this needs to be a successful mission, so he questions whether he, as a fugitive, is the best person to go to Pharaoh and set the people free. Of course, God knows and assures him that he will not be alone and that God will save them all.

This encounter between God and Moses reminds me of a concept I learned when I was working on a therapy degree. The concept, called "turning towards one another," was developed by John and Julie Gottman. The Gottmans studied behavioral patterns in couples and identified patterns that indicate longevity in marriage, and they also identified patterns that indicate divorce. Their research and therapeutic methods are now part of the gold standard for couples therapy.

“Turning Towards One Another” is a pattern that characterizes healthier relationships. It’s when one partner makes an attempt to connect, and the second partner turns towards them to accept that bid for connection. (When the second partner does not accept the bid for connection, it’s called turning away or turning against; what we want is turning towards.) In studying newlyweds over a period of six years, the Gottmans found that the couples who were still married six years later turned towards each other 86% of the time. The couples who were divorced six years later turned towards each other only 33% of the time. The extent to which couples turn towards one another, accepting those bids for connection (or not), is a primary indicator of marriage health and longevity. But we can also apply the concept of turning towards one another to other relationships, such as among parent and child, or friend to friend, or neighbor to neighbor.

I can’t help but think that turning towards one another is what God and Moses do. And I think it actually happens several times:

- God sends a burning bush and an angel, and Moses turns towards it with curiosity.
- God calls out, “Moses, Moses!” and Moses responds, “Here I am.”
- God says, remove your sandals, and Moses does so.
- God says, I am sending you to Egypt, and Moses goes.

But even before all of that, the people have been crying out to God from the bondage of slavery and suffering, so God going to Moses and hatching a plan to save them is God turning towards the people. In this way, the entire fate of the Hebrew people rests on this encounter between God and Moses.

Since hearing the news of Dolly Parton’s death on Tuesday, I have been reading tributes, listening to interviews, and reminiscing about the time I got to see her live at the Grand Ole Opry in my own family’s home state of Tennessee. I’ve also been re-reading her first memoir, published in 1994. In it, she describes her early years, growing up in a deeply religious, Pentecostal family but wrestling with what it meant for her personally to find God and follow God, especially in a context full of hellfire,

brimstone, and judgment. She writes about finding God at the age of 12. Here is what she says:

I truly wanted to receive salvation, and I prayed long and hard for it. [But prayer] was too personal a thing for me to do in public. That is why I prayed on my own, in private places. I finally found one place that became very special to me. It was an old abandoned church... Most of its windows were broken, and its old floorboards were buckled and dusty, but to me it seemed like God still lived there. Ironically, it had become a place for all types of sin and vice. Boys would meet there to shoot craps or drink beer and moonshine. Couples would use it at night for sexual encounters. Boys and men fought there... And yet, for me, God still lived there...

One day, as I prayed in earnest, I broke through some sort of spirit wall and found God... I had met [God] not as a chastising, bombastic bully but as a friend I could talk to on a one-to-one basis. He is our father, after all, and that's the kind of heavenly father that made sense to me...

I also knew that my dreams of making

music, of traveling outside the Smokies and pursuing a greater purpose, were not silly childhood ideas but grand real schemes ordained and co-created by my newfound heavenly father... I thanked God long and loud for having shown himself to me. I sang with a strength and conviction that only God... could have understood. The joy of the truth I found there is with me to this day."

On my way home that day, I was on a cloud... My happy feet danced on and kicked up the dust of the old road... I will never forget the feel of my feet on that happy road. The dust seemed beautiful to me. Poverty and doubt did not exist. I knew God. I knew where paradise was. It was ahead of me.

By all accounts, that joy and truth stayed with Dolly from that holy ground moment at age 12 to the end of her life at age 80. In just about every quote or tribute I've read this week, she has mentioned either God or her faith, if not both. So many different kinds of people love and respect her and, in a way, have come together in the wake of her death; one writer noted that her fanbase includes "conservative church ladies, LGBTQ+ young adults, rural mountain

men and urban hipsters,” a grouping of people who rarely seem to have much in common. In that way, it has felt like a holy ground kind of week as collectively we have gasped at the profundity of her loss. And that has surprised me, not because I didn’t think the world would weep for Dolly, but because we keep learning about the breadth of this one person’s reach, the depth of this one person’s impact, and the ways one person’s authenticity and big-heartedness have given people permission to live their own full and authentic selves. And while her humanitarian, health care, and philanthropic work were certainly made possible by fame and fortune, Dolly credited all that she accomplished to God and to a faith that took flight when she turned towards God on the holy ground of an abandoned, desecrated church.

So, what is it that makes holy ground holy? Certainly, holy ground includes places that have been set aside for sacred purpose: The holy ground of the burning bush and Mount Sinai. The holy ground of this Sanctuary and our Chapel and memorial garden. But if holy ground can be all kinds of other places too, what makes it holy?

Of course, the first criterion for holy ground is that God is present. And because God is everywhere, present to us all the time, I’ve started to wonder if there’s any ground on which we stand that couldn’t be holy? Maybe holy ground is ordinary ground--ordinary ground made special by God’s presence and our presence. Not our presence just in the sense of physically being there, but our presence in terms of our being present--the ways we’re present when we lose ourselves in the wonder of a connection beyond ourselves, when we pause for a sunrise, or turn towards a child, or at the still small voice of God we say “Here I am.”

I think our children create holy ground during our 10:00 a.m. worship service when they all stretch their arms as big as God’s love and let their hands rest before beginning to pray. I think we create holy ground when we turn towards each other and say, “The peace of Christ be with you.” I think we create holy ground when we mean it when we say, “I’m sorry” and “I love you.” Or even when we say, “I don’t know what to say right now, but I’m here for you.” In these moments, we lay aside any sense of pretense and ego and outcome. We’re just present, in the

presence of our living God and God's goodness and one another. We're on holy ground.

I know I've experienced holy ground in hospital rooms and coffee shops, while standing before the vastness of the ocean, and on walks deep in the woods. For me, these have been otherworldly moments that take my breath away, when time seems to stop, and heaven and earth meld together as one.

Day in and day out, Moses walked his father-in-law's flocks over ordinary ground. And one day, he found himself suddenly on holy ground, removing his sandals and turning towards the holy, saying Here I am and Yes, I will go. Moses saying yes required significant sacrifice and risk--he went back to Pharaoh and said, "Let my people go!" And then delivered them to the promised land.

For us, in the modern world, it's probably never going to be an angel or a burning bush or the voice of God speaking loud and clear. But when holy ground comes, will we be paying attention enough to recognize it? Will we be curious enough to get a closer look? Will we be bold and

ready and eager enough to meet God in that place?

For our ancestor Moses and for our sister Dolly, holy ground moments made all the difference, and countless lives were changed as a result. Friends, the same is possible for you and for me. We may not deliver a people from the bondage of slavery or poverty, but we must never underestimate what God can do with holy ground, and what is possible when we show up.

Because however they come, holy ground moments attune us with the will of the divine and help us live more fully. They help connect us with the God of our ancestors, who is the Great I Am. They help us see the face of Christ in the people we encounter.

May we have the wisdom to recognize holy ground when it comes and the courage to meet God there. Amen.