

There's a story that the Buddha was once sitting and teaching his disciples when they were interrupted by a frantic farmer who had lost his cows and wondered if they had seen the cows. The Buddha said no they hadn't, and the farmer went on looking. The Buddha observed to his disciples that they were much happier than the farmer because he was so emotionally attached to the cows that when they disappeared, he was distraught. "Release your cows," the Buddha is reported to have said.

My take on that story is that the Buddha chose not only teachable moments but teachable pupils. You notice that he didn't stop the farmer and tell him about the spiritual benefits of releasing his cows. He understood—and perhaps respected—that that was not something the farmer was interested in at the moment, so he saved his wisdom for his disciples.

I see the same restraint in the Buddha's rules for teaching dharma, or truth. He made quite an extensive list of rules for monks who would be expected to teach, and there's a whole series of restrictions that go something like, "Do not teach dharma to one holding an umbrella who is not sick. Do not teach dharma to one holding a knife who is not sick. Do not teach dharma to one lying down who is not sick." I haven't found a commentary on this set of rules, but to me it looks like the Buddha doesn't want monks going around teaching dharma to people who are distracted or on their way to do something else. People who are ready to learn will be fully present, no umbrellas or knives signaling distraction.

The people who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus and gained access by cutting a hole in the roof and lowering him with ropes which they had apparently brought along display this kind of single-mindedness. Less determined people would have said, "Oh, it's too crowded,

let's try to catch him later on his way out," or "Let's try the healer down the street." Not these folks. Climb the roof, rappel the guy up there, cut a hole in the roof, lower him down right in Jesus' face, that's how you get things done when you're serious about it.

Jesus, for his part, is reciprocally serious. He takes this interruption not as an interruption but as his new agenda. It reminds me of a story I heard about Wynton Marsalis playing a concert when someone's cell phone went off. Instead of being thrown by the interruption or trying to ignore it, he started playing the ring tone on his trumpet and finally resolved back into the original melody. He made it part of the song. Jesus made the interruption his agenda, because actually it was. He was teaching dharma to people who were focused on learning it.

So he heals the man and tells him he's forgiven, the man picks up his mat and goes, and the next thing we know Jesus is out recruiting again, this time calling the tax collector Levi to follow him. Levi has him to dinner, along with "many" tax collectors and sinners who'd been following Jesus already. Again, notice Jesus' criterion: if you want to hear what I have to say, that qualifies you to hear what I have to say.

The scribes act as foils in these stories. When Jesus heals the paralytic and tells him he's forgiven, the scribes murmur to each other that only God can forgive. It's a little bit strange, because Jesus *said* "Your sins are forgiven," not "I forgive your sins," but anyway, they seem to be challenging his authority. The approved way of getting one's sins forgiven, of course, is to take oneself and the appropriate sacrifice to the Temple, where the priest would take your matter to God. Here's Jesus just cutting out the religious establishment entirely and assuring the man that his sins were already forgiven, in front of all kinds of random people.

Likewise at Levi's house, the scribes comment disapprovingly on the company Jesus keeps; birds of a feather flock together after all. If Jesus were truly a person of God, he would not sully himself with the company of such explicitly and openly fallen people.

What these two scribal comments have in common is a sense of purity, or of the sacred apart from the profane. I mean, they disapprove of Jesus' pronouncement of forgiveness because it's not done by the right people in the right place—by priests in the Temple. And they disapprove of the meal with sinners because sharing a table is an act of intimacy, and Jesus risks representing himself as unconcerned about sin by doing so with these fallen characters. To the extent that he claims to be sent by God, he is representing God as unconcerned about sin. In fact, specifically, he's representing God as unconcerned about class traitors, imperial collaborators, and people who traffic in sacred sexual intimacy for commercial purposes. He's trivializing truly bad behavior, in their eyes.

Now, this is why I wanted everybody to know about the Buddha and his rules for teaching dharma. I think Jesus is teaching dharma by teaching dharma to people who want to hear it. That is, he's modeling the kingdom of God by making his criterion for inclusion *not* your ability to meet institutional requirements; his criterion for inclusion is that you showed up. I know I've used this quote before, but Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic, wrote, "Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person. It is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction." Truth isn't born or found free-standing. It emerges in conversation and interactions between people who are focused on the conversation. Dharma, salvation, the kingdom of God comes to be known, never in general, not off in sacred spaces but always specifically, and right here right

now with the people who came for it.

Bennett Guess, who's worked in the national setting of the UCC for many years, wrote that it's not the devil, but God, who is in the details. "The love of God is not only about pouring general absolution on the masses, but it's about the one-on-one work of being in solidarity with those who are in pain." "It is in the asterisks of our faith," he writes, "whereby we discover that God's love is reserved specifically for two people in this world: for you and for your enemy."¹

When I think of the paralytic, and all the trouble his friends went to to get him into the presence of Jesus, aside from whatever symbolic meaning his physical ailment has in the story, I think what a testimony it was to *him* that his friends loved him and found him worth all that trouble. After that day, he couldn't doubt that he meant a lot to them. But then for Jesus to focus his attention on him and tell him that his sins were forgiven—that suggests that he heard loud and clear that God cherished and embraced him already, not in spite of himself but as he already was. The truth was born, or the kingdom came into evidence between specific friends and Jesus, collectively *doing* love with one another.

At Levi's house, Jesus did not proclaim the kingdom by protecting himself or God from contamination. He proclaimed the kingdom by breaking bread with specific fallen people, making them know that they were loved not in spite of themselves but because of themselves. They were, in each other's company, lovable. That's how the kingdom makes itself known, with specific, granular people showing up for "dialogic interaction."

Life, as John Lennon said, is what happens while you're busy making other plans. The seeds of God's transformation are in every silly moment, when we're awake enough to realize that dharma is being taught. And the dharma, the kingdom, is in the kindness we generate

together when that awareness overtakes us. The kingdom of God is revealed to us in the smallest of things, like the tiniest seed that is capable of producing something magnificent, like a tiny measure of leaven that causes the whole loaf to rise, like that one single lost sheep that is worth pursuing, like a cool cup of water offered in Christ's name, like the encouraging love of a faithful friend, like a little child who can teach us and show us the way.

God is in the details.

Let us pray.

Great God of all that is large and small, show us how to love with particularity. Teach us how to examine our lives and our relationships in closer detail, to not be afraid to see things up close as they really are, but to view them as you do, to pay greater attention to our words and actions, to live creatively and faithfully so that no one person will ever be excluded or abandoned on our watch. This we pray in the name of Jesus who loves each one of us by name. Amen.

ⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200245d/god_is_in_the_details