

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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Seeds of Life

Mark 4:26-27

To live by faith is to struggle with the mystery of God's presence in our world. We see this process at work in the events described in the 17th chapter of Ezekiel. It was a time of great political confusion. The old institutions were crumbling. The long established political wisdom no longer seemed to work. The people of Palestine had for many years been dominated by Babylon to the East and Egypt to the South. Every year the king was confronted with the requirement to pay tribute to one or the other of these powers. This was "protection money" to ensure against a foreign invasion by a more powerful neighbor. It was humiliating to have to pay. The Israelite kings always looked for ways to avoid paying. When the young king Jehoiachin refused to pay Nebuchadnezzar in 597, Jerusalem was sacked and its leaders carted off to Babylon. Among the leaders who were exiled was the prophet Ezekiel.

During this period of exile the prophet addressed the situation of his people. Ezekiel called on the exiled leaders to stop debating the same old issues. They were still arguing over whether the new king should pay the tribute or try to strike a better deal with Egypt. Ezekiel pointed out that it was time to leave behind the assumptions of the past and begin to appreciate the unseen activity of God in the world. The issues that matter are not who pays tribute, who gets tribute, or which king manages to stay on the throne. The real issue is learning to recognize where the grace of God is at work in history.

The problem for Ezekiel's people and for us is that God's activity rarely conforms to our expectations. It has its own character. Ezekiel's contemporaries could not envision God caring for anything more than the success of their nation. The kingdom of God and the kingdom of Israel was the same for them. This tendency is a powerful one in our experience as well. How easy it is to identify God with our political philosophy or our national interests, or our favorite social issues. Then when events around us fail to follow our script we are plunged into the crisis that overtook Ezekiel's contemporaries.

This crisis is at the heart of a famous passage from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The legend of the Grand Inquisitor tells a story set in Seville during the Spanish Inquisition. In the story, Jesus returns to observe what the inquisition is all about. He is immediately recognized as a subversive and arrested. The chief interrogator (known as the Grand Inquisitor) comes to visit him in his cell.

The Grand Inquisitor understands who Jesus is and begins to lecture Jesus on how he botched his mission when he was on earth. He points out that Jesus' fatal mistake was affirming human freedom. Worst of all Jesus left human beings free to reject him. Jesus had failed to recognize that freedom was too much of a burden for humanity. The Grand Inquisitor goes on to proudly announce that he and his colleagues have corrected Jesus' mistakes. They are ministering to the real need of humanity by removing the burden of human freedom. They are making people happy by giving them security in exchange for their freedom.

The virtue of the Grand Inquisitor is that he openly admits that he no longer serves Christ. The Grand Inquisitor gleefully uses the inquisition to create something better than the movement Jesus began. His vision is a world controlled by the raw exercise of power. It is a world which leaves no room for grace.

Jesus addresses this concern in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark. There he explores the mystery of God's activity by telling two parables of growth. Jesus describes the seed that grows while the farmer sleeps. The farmer recognizes the growth that is taking place but has no idea how or why the seed is growing. Jesus uses these parables to challenge his followers to be receptive to God's surprising activity in the world. God's grace is at work in ways that we cannot see or anticipate to bring wholeness to the human family. A new and promising future is coming into being whether we can see it or not. Neither our ineptness nor our disobedience will prevent it from happening. The bottom line is that God provides the growth.

The surprising progress of grace in our world is explored in a 1940s movie called *The Petrified Forest*, starring Bette Davis, Humphrey Bogart, and Leslie Howard. A rundown gas station and restaurant in an isolated desert location is the unlikely meeting place for a group of broken people in search of healing. There is the young woman, Gabrielle, who helps her family run the station but is yearning to experience the larger world of education, art, and culture. But she is trapped in the family business that cannot function without her. There is the gangster, Duke Mantee, who is on the run from the law and waits at the station for the woman he loves letting the opportunity to flee to safety in Mexico slip by. When the police close in he holds the others as hostages. There is the jaded intellectual, Allen Squire, who has not found the fulfillment in life that he seeks because he has consistently run away from his responsibilities. These three are surrounded by a group of equally desperate people from various walks of life who are all looking for something they cannot seem to reach.

It is the intellectual, Allen Squire, who envisions the possibility of grace in the midst of this hopeless way station. He finds himself falling in love with Gabrielle. She is clearly smitten by him but he knows that a romantic relationship between them would not be healthy for her. He also feels a certain kinship with Mantee the gangster. Though they do not think the same way or speak the same language, they both know that their lives are wasted beyond hope. Neither of them will ever be anything more than desperate men on the run from themselves.

Squire makes a seemingly absurd proposal to the gangster while Gabrielle is out of the room. He signs over his life insurance policy to Gabrielle and asks Mantee to shoot him as he pretends to flee the building. For the sake of Gabrielle, Mantee should make it look like a real murder rather than a mercy killing. With the proceeds from the insurance Gabrielle can be set free to pursue her dream of education. Because the lives of Squire and Mantee are beyond redemption the best contribution they can make is to plant the seeds of new life for Gabrielle.

Squire's decision is a sign of God's redemptive presence. It is a sign of the grace that comes to our deserts of hopelessness. The seed is planted and God provides the growth.