

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Feb 8th 2016

A few weeks ago, I was scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed and saw a meme that said, “Religion is a person sitting in church thinking about kayaking. Spirituality is a person sitting in a kayak thinking about God.”

This didn't sit well with me, for several reasons. I won't try to define religion here, or spirituality, although I think the quote is based on thin meanings of those words. The main reason it didn't sit well with me is that I have spent a good part of my adult life in church, which, this implies, is a silly thing to do when you could be off kayaking. Since church attendance is becoming ever more countercultural for my generation, I have on several occasions been asked to explain myself. In my post-graduate service in Ireland, I got funny looks as a 20-something who not only attended church, but voluntarily worked in one (gasp!) and wanted a career in ministry (gasp!). People would say, “That's find for you, but I don't need to go to church. I can talk to God whenever I want!” Thankfully, that is true! This response typifies the “spiritual but not religious” lifestyle to which many of my good friends ascribe. (For further reading, I would recommend *Spiritual but Not Religious: An Oar-stroke Closer to the Farther Shore* by Locklin.)

I don't think church is the only place to find God. In the first reading, Solomon and the Israelites celebrate God's presence in the new temple. The “glory of the Lord” filled the place. It must have been magnificent to behold! It must have been wonderful to know they had a place where they could always go to be near God, and where God was pleased to dwell with them. That did not mean God abandoned everywhere else.

In the Gospel, Jesus heals all those who come to him in need of care. Two things caught me in this passage. First, Jesus is out in the world, not in the temple. Second, “people immediately recognized him.” How did they recognize him? Had they passed around sketches so they would know to seek out healing when they saw him? Did they already know him? I wonder.

How do we recognize God? How do we see God out in the world, ready to heal us, unless we know how to look? Some may be very lucky to receive that grace all alone, steering their own kayak, in an awe-inspiring sunrise on a still lake. I'm not sure I could. To me, that sunrise points beyond itself to its Creator, and it is even more beautiful because of that. I see this because a community has taught me: a local, global, 2000-year-old community saying, “Look! Do you see?” That same community gathers together in church for many reasons, one of which is to know God better. We remember that we don't have all the answers, especially not without God and each other. This community encourages me to continue recognizing God in the world the rest of the week. After all, it is impossible to recognize someone you've never met.

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