

“GOD’S SPACIOUS LOVE”

Genesis 1:26-31; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 14:1-3

September 15, 2019

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Grace Ji-Sun Kim opens her book, *Embracing the Other: The Transformative Spirit of Love*, with the following: “As an Asian American woman growing up in North America, I have experienced alienation, discrimination, and racism. Because of the color of my skin and the shape of my eyes (some) people in the white dominant society think of me as different, and treat me that way” (p. 1). She goes on to ask, “Why as a society, do people tend to treat those who are different with suspicion, discrimination, and trepidation?”

She believes we can do something about this problem and she finds inspiration in a certain understanding of the triune God. “These three persons,” she writes, “form a dynamic community of love, which flows out into the world as an ever-flowing stream. The gracious love of the Triune God can be an infinite source of loving restoration... the notion of Spirit God helps us reimagine divinity, as the transformative Spirit of love who embraces us all” (p. 140).

Grace found strength to address the racism that had impacted her life in a re-examination of her understanding about God. She needed to reject the patriarchal imagery for God in the Bible and discover the God whose love flowed into the world through creation and whose love was embodied in people of faith through the Spirit.

According to Genesis, in the beginning God’s Spirit hovered over the face of the earth and we are told the earth was without form, chaos. And so God begins to create, first bringing light, then separating light from darkness, creating the stars, the sun, and the moon, separating land from sea, making the creatures of the sea, the land and the air. God is making space for life to thrive.

There is no mention of love, but God is pleased with the work, declaring it well-done. And then God creates human beings... in God’s image... in God’s likeness. Still nothing about love, but there’s something in this word “likeness” that implies a very strong bond. The Hebrew word suggests a statue-like similarity. It’s very concrete and physical. We are living statues of God. In making a place in the world for humanity, God makes space for a continuing presence.

This bond is critical for the charge that has been given to us, the charge to exercise dominion over the world. We are not given authority to do anything we want to the earth and its creatures. We are more like stewards reflecting the image of the creator through our activity. Virginia Mollenkott writes that “human responsibility, in its deepest and fullest dimension, entails *goddling*, an embodiment or incarnation of God’s love in human flesh, with the goal of co-creating with God a just and loving human society” (p.2).

Paul makes the love more explicit in the passage we read from Ephesians. After writing about God being reflected in all things of the earth, and of the riches of God’s glory, Paul prays that Jesus’ followers will be strengthened by the power of the Spirit, that Christ may

dwell in their hearts (his version of being made in God's image), and that they will be rooted and grounded in love.

This is the whole point, that there is a length and breadth and height and depth to this love that can hardly be imagined. God's love is spacious. It is reflected in all of creation. We see it in the birds of the air and the animals that roam the earth, in the creatures of the sea. It is specific, concrete, incarnated in human flesh. There are no spaces which are not filled with the love of God.

And yet this is not the image of God presented by all Christians. Over the last two millennia, (some) Christians have fenced the table, withholding the bread and the wine of the last supper from those who understood the sacrament's meaning differently. Some have relegated others to the fires of hell because they didn't believe the right doctrines, didn't associate with the right people, or didn't fall in love with someone of the appropriate gender. Heretics, gays, the mentally ill, people who were divorced, communists, liberals, the ill, the disabled, women who have had an abortion, uppity women in general, slaves, Native Americans, Muslims and a host of other people have been judged by some in the church for a wide variety of reasons.

God's love is deeper and broader than this. God's love is spacious. If we start with that understanding of God, so much of the other pettiness and meanness falls away. Jesus made space for prostitutes, for lepers, even for tax collectors in his kingdom. Jesus made space for the poor, the grieving, even for the enemy. Making space is what he does. He tells his disciples, "In my Father's house are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you... so that where I am, you may be also.

God's spacious love is about God's love making space for you. We're going to spend this year talking about making space in a variety of ways, but it all begins with God's spacious love. That's where blogger and writer Rachel Held Evans came down as she rejected certain aspects of evangelical faith. She wrote: "The gospel doesn't need a coalition devoted to keeping the wrong people out. It needs a family of sinners, saved by grace, committed to tearing down the walls, throwing open the doors, and shouting, 'Welcome! There's bread and wine. Come eat with us and talk.' This isn't a kingdom for the worthy; it's a kingdom for the hungry." (from *The Christian Century*, September 11, 2019, p.30).

That's what love does. It makes a space at the table for those who are hungry. It offers a word of welcome to the stranger in need of shelter. It flows with abundance into a world of need. Its supply is endless in the spacious love of God. May we be its faithful stewards as we bear the love of God into the world. Amen.

Resources:

Embracing the Other: The Transformative Spirit of Love. Grace Ji-Sun Kim. William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Co. Grand Rapids MI 2015.

Godding: Human Responsibility and the Bible. Virginia Mollenkott. Crossroad Publishing Co, New York NY 1987.

"Woman of Valor: Rachel Held Evans, Public Theologian" by Jason Byassee. *Christian Century*, September 11, 2019