



Study Guide 3: STORY OF PLACE AND DISPLACEMENT

How does where you live make a difference for how you live and tell God's story? Jesus's attention to his context(s) and listener(s) shapes how he tells his story and receives theirs. Attention to context and place presents both challenges and opportunities in sharing God's story with others.

Introduction

- Share as much as you can remember of the story of the Prodigal Son.
- From your perspective, what is the emphasis of this story?

Know the Story

Read Luke 15: 11-32 (*The story of the Prodigal Son.*)

- What did you remember to include as you told the story from memory?
- What was left out?

In chapter 2 of his book, *What Do They Hear?: Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*, Mark Allan Powell recounts an experiment with 12 American seminary students assigned to read the parable of the prodigal son and then recount it from memory. Interestingly enough, not one of them mentioned the famine in verse 14. Powell says that he himself had always considered Jesus' reference to the famine as an insignificant detail, but he was surprised to see all of his American students forget it. So he organized a study with 100 American students of different genders, races, ages, economic statuses, and religions. Out of 100 students, only 6 mentioned the famine in their retelling of Jesus' parable.

Curious about the influence of context on reading the parable, he went to St. Petersburg, Russia, and did the same experiment with 50 Russians. He was shocked when 42 of them remembered the famine. Only 6 out of 100 Americans, but 42 out of 50 Russians. Even more interesting is the fact that many Russian readers made no reference to the prodigal son squandering his property! Almost every American student had mentioned that. People from these two cultures heard the emphases of the parable differently.

Then he asked a group of seminarians at Makumira Seminary in Tanzania, the question "Why is the young man hungry?" He was curious to see if they would answer more like the Americans – because he squandered all his money, or more like the Russians – because a severe famine struck the country. But the Tanzanian seminarians answered in yet a third way: because no one gave him anything to eat. They were shocked by such a society – one that would let a stranger go hungry and not give him anything to eat.

Who had the right answer to the question about why the younger son was hungry? The Americans, Russians, or Tanzanians? Of course, they all did.

Be the Story

Paying attention to our context is important. It influences how we understand, live, and tell God's story. Think about your congregation or ministry context.

- What are you already doing that seems to be working well?
- What are the greatest (and/or most underutilized) gifts of your church community or larger community (people, space, other)?
- What are the current limiting factors defining what stories could emerge?
- What brought you to this ministry setting and why did you decide to stay?
- What is the most meaningful part of this ministry for you?
- Where do you see God at work in this ministry?
- Describe your group to someone new and tell how they would be nurtured here.
- What kind of practical and cultural values are displayed and lived out in our group?
- If you were to leave this group for five years, what would you expect to see when you returned? What would you hope to see?

Tell the Story

Write your own Gospel account – your personal account of the intersections between your own story and God's story. You can begin with these three steps:

1. First, write down all the important parts of your story (events, ethnicity, economic status, geographical location, etc.) that can't be left out if people really want to understand who you are.
2. Next, take some time to list all the important parts of God's story that can't be left out if people want to understand who God really is.
3. Finally, consider the ways you see your story fitting together with God's story right now. How and when does this connection emerge in your life? How has it been nurtured and challenged so far?

Now you are well on your way to having the plot, characters, and ideas for constructing your own Gospel account. Consider:

Who can you think of who might need to hear your Gospel account? How can you imagine that happening?

And don't forget: Telling your Gospel account doesn't always mean only words and conversation. It means walking, living, and loving, too.

Closing Prayer

God of all places, we can become so focused on our own experiences that we lose sight of your story being expressed in different ways. Help us to pay attention to both our stories and those of others, so that we can better understand, live, and tell your story. Amen.

(Adapted from the PD2015 Session, "Story of Place and Displacement" by Carol Jacobson, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. For complete curriculum, visit www.elcaymnet.org/PD2015.)

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