Dialogue Sunday School

Mosiah 29-Alma 4

30 May 2020

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Good morning, friends.

I want to thank Taylor Petrey for inviting me to present today and the *Dialogue* board for their support of this event and for all the teachers who have proceeded me in the series. I have learned a lot and hope to make a worthy contribution today.

Appropriately, our subjects for this morning are political anger and political mourning. Perhaps at no time has there been a shortage of things to be angry about and things to mourn, but this last week has been especially trying.

I wish I could teach you how, with God's help, to turn your anger into mourning, but I'm afraid I'm still learning how to do that myself. All I can offer this morning is an invitation to reflect on the ineffectual and

harmful aspects of anger in politics and to consider the soul-enhancing power of mourning. In the 30th Psalm, fifth verse we read:

"For his anger *endureth but* a moment; in his favour is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

I was a young man when my father read this verse at a funeral and taught me to read the last word as "mourning": "Weeping may endure

for a night, but joy cometh in the mourning."

Lately as I have pondered the injustices of the world, my thoughts have turned to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. That parable is about a rich man who wore fine clothes and ate well every day and also about a beggar named Lazarus who wanted to eat the crumbs from the rich man's table. When they died, the last was first and the first was last: Lazarus found himself in Abraham's

bosom and the rich man found himself in hell.

I am personally drawn to this parable because of its cynic tone, and because the beggar has a name while the rich man is nameless, a sign that the parable is turning the values of this world on their head. The total reversal of the rich man and Lazarus poses a key question for all of us about who we are and where we are right now.

The parable is followed by the words of the Lord:

"It is impossible but that offences will come, but woe unto him, through whom they come! . . . .

"Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith." (Luke 17: 1-5).

Speaking to you as I am from Minnesota, I cannot fail to mention my own outrage and grief at the offensive death of George Floyd.

Many people in our community are afraid and angry, not to mention thoroughly exhausted at having to explain what is right in front of all of us.

While I have no magic elixir to make the horrors of the last week go away, I

truly believe that we can, slowly but surely, turn outrage to good use through mourning. This may not be the usual course for outrage to flow, but by way of genuine mourning, a mourning that implicates our own sin and vulnerability in a sorrow that also can "bear the shame of the world," a sorrow like that borne by Christ himself, we might in some way make sense of the senseless.

As James Baldwin wrote, "Not everything that is faced can be

changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Facing police brutality, facing white privilege, the history of white violence, including slavery, as well as the inhumanity and inequality deeply rooted in our current system, is not easy to do. Lamentably, it is much easier to look away or to fill our lives with superficial media and other lightminded pursuits.

Of course, we may not be able to face all of this suffering at once, but learn to face it we must. Learning to be

sorrowful and to bear it is what we are called to do.

And that is exactly what Alma did. He saw all this – he suffered days like ours – days of violence, persecution and affliction, days when punches were thrown and people were murdered in the streets – Alma saw days like that and we are told that he was "very sorrowful" (Alma 4:15) – but he also learned in the middle of that sorrow that "the Spirit of the Lord did not fail him." And it will not fail

us! Even when sorrow is “heaped upon [us],” even when, especially when affliction and inequality weigh us down – the Spirit of the Lord will not fail us!

And so that’s where we are headed this morning, brothers and sisters. Toward a deeper appreciation of the power of sorrow and toward those moments when mourning awakens in us a newfound reliance on the Lord and a love for serving Him.

Mosiah 29 – Alma 4, 5 chapters, roughly 7,000 words, constitute a text that I believe can help us just a little toward facing and then changing the world for the better. In the text, we will confront the problem of political anger and factionalism. We will also remember again what great cause we have to mourn. Mourning, and mourning with those that mourn, is a cry and a lament for the loss of innocence. Mourning brings us face to face with deprivation, dispossession, and disappointment. We mourn

because of the distance between us and the separation that keeps us apart. We feel, too, the sorrow of others, and their times of grief and suffering. As such, mourning is a significant aspect of our covenants and part of why we must leave lightmindedness behind.

At best, all I can hope to offer this morning is a brief overview of the scene, together with a meditation on how mourning can give us the much needed perspective on our losses, including losses both public and

private. Part of the process of mourning is examining ourselves, seeing and acknowledging our weakness, preparing our hearts to be anxious that every man and woman should have an equal chance, and expressing a willingness to answer for our own sins (Mosiah 29:38).

Overview

There are many events in these chapters, including a new arrangement of the government of Zarahemla, a murder, a large public trial, a civil war

that turns into a war with the Lamanites, and a period of protracted mourning and peace.

As I READ and re-read the texts for today, I was struck again, as I have been before, by the centrality of mourning in these chapters.

For example, at the close of Mosiah 29, we learn of the death of King Mosiah and of Alma the Elder. Right off the bat, the people had a king and now he's gone, but not before he

dismantled the monarchy and put in a place a new form of government.

Verse 1 of Alma 1 is a brief eulogy of King Mosiah, an ancient obituary as it were: that he had “gone the way of all the earth, having warred a good warfare, walking uprightly before God, leaving none to reign in his stead; nevertheless he had established laws, and they were acknowledge by the people” and “obliged to abide by the laws which he had made.” (Alma 1:1)

The militaristic metaphor is interesting since from the very beginning King Mosiah is introduced as one instructed in languages, in reading, and in teaching. And during his reign, King Mosiah spends almost all his time writing to his people and translating ancient records, but it doesn't seem that anywhere is he found fighting. Nevertheless, in nothing does his uprightness ever seem to be questioned and what's more, in what is perhaps the ultimate praise any of us

could hope for: his people “did wax strong in love for [him]” and “they did esteem him more than any other man” (Mosiah 29:40).

From such we learn that those who willingly share power, who govern by good will, and who teach freely how individuals can become their best selves are rewarded by the love and esteem of those they serve.

Indeed, all five chapters for today, but most especially Alma 4, are an

extended eulogy. In these chapters, we lament the iniquities and abominations of wicked rulers, the burdens on righteous leaders, the vanities of the world, the false doctrines that circulate "for the sake of riches and honor" (Alma 1:16), the persecutions and contentions fueled by political conflict, the idolatry and idleness of those who transgress bounds of propriety, and the death and loss of property and treasure caused by war. One of the most tragic images of the entire Book of Mormon comes at the

end of Alma 2: Bodies devoured by beasts and vultures, bones heaped up on the earth.

These staggering losses call for a response.

The only response that makes sense is mourning.

All these losses constitute a sort of broken promise or broken covenant, and the answer for which they call is a covenant kept.

Eulogy, from the Greek *Eu-logia,* means a blessing, a true word, and was occasionally used in early times as a word to describe the Holy Sacrament of our Lord (see Cor. 10:16).

In ancient Greek rhetoric, eulogy is a species of encomium – speaking in praise of someone or something, which in turn is a species of epideictic rhetoric.

The three types of discourse: Judicial rhetoric, which takes place in a court room and concerns itself with actions from the past; Deliberative rhetoric, which takes place in legislatures and concerns itself with the future; and Epideictic rhetoric, which is a celebration of community values in the present.

Eulogies are part of this third kind of rhetoric, celebrating the values we hold dear right now. Eulogies reinforce these values, and thus it

could be said that eulogies are evergreen. Aiming at consolation and comfort by pronouncing a blessing for the goodness in a person, eulogies elevate each of us to live our lives on a higher plane by invoking the virtues of others, virtues which we would do well to emulate.

Funerary rites, including all their ceremonial patterns function to separate the body of the deceased from the community of the living and to assist the mourners in adjusting to

their loss.[1] Houlbrooke goes further in noting that funeral ceremonies and eulogies serve to secure happiness, or at least tranquility for the departed so they no longer haunt the living and they also serve to repair the breeches in the fabric of society caused by the death of one of our number.[2]

If ever there was a society that needed to repair the breech in its fabric, it was Zarahemla in the fifth year of the reign of the judges, following a violent civil

[1] P.E. Irion, "The Funeral and the Bereaved," in *Acute Grief and the Funeral* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1976), 32.
[2] R. Houlbrooke, *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 1.

war. So, let us work our way there through a text full of grief and the power of social and religious values to bind up wounds.

Mosiah 29

In Mosiah 29, we hear the voice of King Mosiah through an epistolary rhetoric – he speaks directly to us in the form of a letter, a persuasive letter about the kind of persuasion we must learn to practice, a persuasion that engages our hearts and voices in the shaping of a new political reality.

Interestingly, Mosiah tells us that he is afraid of the danger anger can do to our political communities.

In the middle of a succession crisis, in which no one to whom the kingdom belonged and in which a great many people in the community wanted no king, Mosiah was stuck between his duty and the will of the people to compel one of his sons to be king. They refused, and Mosiah zigged when the people zagged.

Quote: “Behold I fear there would rise contentions among you. And who knoweth but what my son, to whom the kingdom doth belong, should turn to be angry and draw away a part of this people after him, which would cause wars and contentions among you, which would be the cause of shedding much blood and perverting the way of the Lord, yea, and destroy the souls of many people.” (Mosiah 29:7)

Mosiah knew that fear and anger in politics are divisive forces, forces that draw us away from each other, and that by their very nature sow contention and discord. When we allow ourselves to feel angry at our fellow-citizens we quickly begin to believe that we share nothing in common and allow conflict to escalate quickly in our minds, if not in reality.

Anger fuels a politics of resentment, revenge, and retaliation instead of the politics of friendship and forgiveness.

The latter, friendship and forgiveness, are the source of the greatest harmony and joy in private life – why then should we think it would be otherwise in public life?

For audience Consideration: In what ways is it possible to practice friendship and forgiveness in politics over and against resentment and revenge?

King Mosiah continues:

“Yea, remember King Noah, his wickedness and his abominations, and also the wickedness and abominations of his people. Behold what great destruction did come upon them; and also because of their iniquities they were brought into bondage.” (Mosiah 29:18)

Lucky for them, and lucky for us, we get this beautiful sentence from King Mosiah that captures, like the sentence highlighted last week by Bob Rees, the transcendent power of the Book of

Mormon to point us to Christ. Mosiah writes,

"And were it not for the interposition of their all-wise Creator, and this because of their sincere repentance, they must unavoidably remain in bondage until now" (Mosiah 29:19).

Brothers and Sisters, our all-wise Creator interposes himself on our behalf, making space for us to escape the bondage of sin through sincere repentance. Jesus was their sole

Deliverer and helped them discover a new and better way to live.

King Mosiah re-echoed the praise of the Lord when he taught his people to accept the burdens of governing the community. He knew all too well that one person could not do all the work of holding social life together. Instead, he taught “that the burden should come upon all the people” (29:34).

Further, King Mosiah taught that the only way for the burden to be borne

by all was if each person “became exceedingly anxious that every man should have an equal chance” and if “every man expressed a willingness to answer for his own sins” (29:38).

We might pause here for a moment of self-reflection. How anxious are you for the equality of others? How sorry are you about injustice? And how can you cultivate such anxiety and sorrow?

I’m not sure I know what it means to
want others to have an equal chance,
but surely it is connected to wanting
what is best for them, wanting for
them to be able to choose their life and
what they’ll be just as much as you
and I want that for ourselves. That you
should be anxious for this should be a
reminder that you deserve no peace,
whether of comfort or conscience,
when those around you have no justice
or suffer unequally to you.

Expressing a willingness to answer for our own sins means focusing on the beams in our own eyes. It means recognizing that our point of view, though wholly natural to us, is only one among many and susceptible to myopia as well as genuine distortion.

In his letter, King Mosiah persuades his people to forsake monarchy and take up the task of sincere repentance and the work of genuine reconciliation.

Alma 1 and 2

Ironically and sadly, after Mosiah's death his people do not all rise to the occasion. For once gone, we see two exemplars of the harm anger does to our communities in Nehor and Amlici.

Nehor and Amlici are both angry men. Divisive factionalists by their nature, both Nehor and Amlici sought only their own self-aggrandizement and cared little if good men or laws stood in their way. They stood for popularity and idleness, vanity and idolatry.

Every move they make is contentious and calculated to divide the people against one another rather than to promote good will and genuine affection.

While we don't have time to examine these two characters at great length today, suffice it to say that their fruit speaks for itself. Murder and last second confession for Nehor, and for Amlici, a lost referendum to make himself king legitimately followed by an illegitimate consecration to a throne

that no longer existed and then bloody and violent civil war. The civil war spills into a wider war with the Lamanites culminating in the heap of bones already mentioned.

Alma 4

And this brings us to Alma 4. This chapter, I think, deserves to be taken far more seriously than I think most readers have. I would go out on a limb here and say that Alma 4 compares favorably with Abraham Lincoln's "Second Inaugural Address" in that it

seems wholly unconcerned with placing blame and focuses instead on the need to perform our duty, to bind up the broken hearted “with malice toward none and charity for all.”

It is written:

“The people were afflicted, yea, greatly afflicted for the loss of their brethren, and also for the loss of their flocks and herds, and also for the loss of their fields of grain, which were trodden under foot and destroyed by the Lmananites.

“And so great were their afflictions that every soul had cause to mourn; and they believed that it was the judgments of God sent upon them because of their wickedness and their abominations; therefore they were awakened to a remembrance of their duty” (Alma 4:2-3).

Within a few years they were back to their old ways, lifted up in their pride, “despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry, and those

who were athirst, and those who were sick and afflicted" (Alma 4:12).

Yet, at the same time, in the middle of wickedness and stumbling were a few who chose a different path.

"Others were abasing themselves, succoring those who stood in need of their succor, such as imparting their substance to the poor and the needy, feeding the hungry, and suffering all manner of afflictions for Christ's sake, who should come, according to the spirit of prophecy.

“Looking forward to that day thus retaining a remission of their sins, being filled with great joy because of the resurrection of the dead according to the will and power and deliverance of Jesus Christ from the bands of death” (Alma 4:13-14).

In this moment we come full circle, back to Alma who saw the afflictions of the humble and the persecutions of his people and who was “very sorrowful” but nevertheless buoyed up by the spirit of the Lord.

How genuinely sorrowful are we for anger in politics, for inequality in society, and for the afflictions and persecutions borne by our brothers and sisters?

It is my prayer that we will be found – not lifting ourselves up, no – but abasing ourselves, succoring, imparting, feeding, and suffering for Christ's sake, looking forward to that day when justice will flow down like a river and righteousness like a mighty

stream – so that we might all be filled with great joy through the power and deliverance of Jesus Christ, in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.