

9 November 2014

Stories and THE Story:
The Gospel According to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
Mark 8:34-36

We've been talking this month about the gospel of Jesus Christ as it appears in secular literature, books that were *not* written to be sold in Christian bookstores. This might seem a little impious to some people, who might feel that a preacher should stick to the Bible and avoid the taint of the world. But for what it's worth, I should add to that that many non-Christians hearing about this sermon series would probably also disapprove, wishing I would stop poisoning good literature by imposing our theology on them. So it works both ways, because in our society, for whatever reason, there is a wall between art and faith.

But it hasn't always been this way – only for the past 500 years or so. Before that, most great literature was religious in theme. Think of Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Even the stories of King Arthur were often composed as explorations of faith. Take, for instance, the anonymous medieval poem, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

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King Arthur held a great Christmas feast, which lasted for seven nights, all the way to New Year's. It was a magnificent banquet, and every night a new entertainment was offered to the king's guests. On the last night, though, just as King Arthur was about to signal for the entertainment to begin, there came a crash from outside. The banquet hall doors flew open, and a huge man on horseback galloped into the hall – and from the top of the knight's head to the bottom of his horse's hooves, both were as green as the grass in May.

“I seek King Arthur! I have come to provide entertainment for his feast!”

King Arthur stood. “I am Arthur. What manner of entertainment do you offer, O knight?”

The knight leaped from his horse and drew a long axe from his saddle. “A merry game to amuse the ladies!” he cried. “One of your knights shall take this axe and strike me as hard as he can on my neck, and then in one year's time, I shall strike that knight! Who will play?” Arthur's knights looked at each other, but no one moved. The Green Knight's lip curled. “Is this really the court of King Arthur whose knights are supposed to be the greatest in the world? Where are they? I see only beardless children? Will no one defend the honor of the court?”

At that, one knight rose to his feet. This was King Arthur's nephew, Sir Gawain, and he said, “For the sake of my king's honor, I will play your game, O knight.”

The Green Knight smiled. “And what is your name?”

“I am called Sir Gawain.”

The Green Knight's smile deepened. He handed Sir Gawain the axe, then knelt at his feet. Sir Gawain took the weapon, raised it high, then brought it down hard on the Green Knight's neck. His head flipped neatly from his shoulders and rolled across the floor. All breathed a sigh of relief, but as they watched, the knight's headless body began to move. It raised itself from the floor, found its head, then stood. The head's eyes flickered open, and its lips said, "Well struck, Sir Gawain. Now, I shall have my turn, one year from tonight. But this time you must come to me. My home is called the Green Chapel. You should have no trouble finding it." At that, the Green Knight leaped on his horse and galloped away, leaving all in silence.

Well, it ruined the feast, I can tell you that. And it ruined the winter for Sir Gawain, for he knew that he was bound by honor to keep his appointment with the Green Knight, but unlike that knight, Sir Gawain knew he would not rise again. He left the court with the first signs of spring, which was a good thing, it appeared, because no matter where he sought over the months that followed, he could find no one who had heard of the Green Chapel or its huge master. Summer and autumn passed, and the snow clouds of winter loomed ahead. Just four days before the new year – still having heard nothing of the Green Knight – Sir Gawain came to a castle on a moor. The lord and lady of the castle met him at the gate, and Sir Gawain asked the question he had asked so many times: "Forgive my intrusion, my lord and lady, but I am Sir Gawain of Arthur's court, and I am on quest. Please, do you know of a place called the Green Chapel?"

The lord of the castle replied, "Of course I know the Green Chapel. Everyone knows the Green Chapel. It's not a mile from here. But Sir Knight, must you go there at once?"

Sir Gawain sighed and replied, "I must be there on New Year's Day."

The lord's face brightened. "Oh! Goody! You can stay with us! Do stay with us! We never get company! I'm Sir Bercilak, and this is my wife, Lady, er, Bercilak."

Sir Gawain agreed to stay with them for his last three days of life, and that night he slept in a bed for the first time in many months. But he didn't sleep as long as he would have wished, for before the first light, he was awakened by his host: "Sir Gawain! Are you awake! Oh good, you're awake! We're about to go hunting for deer! Want to come with us?"

Sir Gawain shook his head sleepily, then said, "Thank you, Sir Bercilak, but I feel as if I've been hunting too long. I feel sure I will find what I need most right here in the castle."

Sir Bercilak laughed loudly. "That sounds like poor sport! But I'll tell you what! Let's make it more sporting! Whatever I get on the hunting field today, I will give you, and whatever you win here inside, you give to me! Is it a bet?"

"Fine, whatever you say," replied Sir Gawain, eager to go back to sleep. They shook hands, and Sir Bercilak hurried away. But Sir Gawain did not get back to sleep, for as soon as Sir Bercilak was gone, into his bedroom came . . . Lady Bercilak.

"My lady!" gasped Sir Gawain. "Forgive me, but you should not be here!"

Lady Bercilak sat on the edge of Sir Gawain's bed.

"My lady, please! You must go at once! Your husband is my host! He would not wish you to be here!" But Lady Bercilak did not leave. Sir Gawain pled with her, until at last she agreed to go, on one condition. That she give him a kiss. Sir Gawain hesitated, then said, "Very well, my lady. One kiss." She kissed him, and then left.

That evening, Sir Bercilak returned from the hunting field bearing a fine stag he had killed, and – according to the terms of the bet – laid the stag at Sir Gawain's feet. "There! I've given you what I gained in the field! Now, you give me what you got today!"

And so Sir Gawain gave him a kiss.

Sir Bercilak roared with laughter and asked where Sir Gawain had gotten his prize, but that had been no part of the bet, and so Sir Gawain said nothing.

The next day was just the same. Sir Bercilak woke Sir Gawain to invite him to go boar-hunting. Sir Gawain declined again, but agreed to the same bet. And once again Lady Bercilak came to his bedroom and would only leave in exchange for one kiss – which Sir Gawain dutifully gave to Sir Bercilak when he returned that evening. And once again, Sir Bercilak shouted with foolish laughter.

On the third morning – the morning of Sir Gawain's last full day on earth – Sir Bercilak went fox hunting. Sir Gawain agreed to the same bet, then stood to lock his door, but he was too late. There was Lady Bercilak. "Lady Bercilak," Sir Gawain said wearily. "I've said it all before. You must go. I will not betray my host's trust in me. I am a knight, and a knight without honor is nothing. Please leave."

"Very well," said Lady Bercilak. "For one kiss." Once again they kissed, but this time she did not leave at once. "There is one more thing I would like to give you. No, no. Just one thing." She removed a sash from her waist. "This is a magical sash. The knight who wears it can never be harmed by any weapon. I want you to have it."

Sir Gawain could only stare. "Thank you," he said. Was it possible?

That night: "Sir Gawain! Look! We had a fine hunt, and we bagged the fox! Here he is! And he's all yours! Now, you give me everything you got today!"

Well, what would you do? Surely it was not worth his life to keep a silly bet. Sir Gawain gave his host a kiss, but kept the charmed sash.

The next day was the fateful day, and shortly after dawn one of Sir Bercilak's servants came around to show Sir Gawain the way to the Green Chapel. The Chapel was a strange place – a round hill, honeycombed with caves – and as Sir Gawain left the servant and rode on alone, he heard the sound of an axe being sharpened. There, just around the hill, was the knight from the Christmas feast. "Welcome, Sir Gawain. I like to see someone who keeps his word." Without

further speech, the Green Knight gestured at a tree stump. Sir Gawain dismounted, reached beneath his armor for the reassuring feeling of the charmed green sash, then removed his helmet and knelt before the stump.

The Green Knight raised his axe high, swung it down, but stopped – just inches from Sir Gawain’s neck. Sir Gawain flinched. “I ask you, Sir Gawain, did I cringe like that when you swung at *my* neck?” the Green Knight demanded.

“You did not,” Sir Gawain replied grimly, baring his neck again. “Try it now.”

The Green Knight swung a second time, and again he stopped short of Sir Gawain’s neck, but this time not a muscle, not a hair, moved. “Ah,” said the knight, “that’s better. Now, one more time, for real.” A third time he lifted his axe; a third time he swung down. But this time he buried the axe in the stump beside Sir Gawain’s neck, leaving a long thin scratch in the skin. Sir Gawain leaped up and drew his sword. The Green Knight would have no other chance.

But the Green Knight only leaned on his axe and smiled. “Put away your blade, Sir Gawain. I have no wish to fight you. The first two blows I stopped the axe, because you kept our bargain, but the third time I left a scar on your neck, because you did not return to me the sash that my wife gave you that morning.”

With trembling fingers, Sir Gawain unbuckled his armor and took off the sash, throwing it to the ground. “Take it,” he said. “It has brought me nothing but shame. I said a knight without honor is nothing. Now I am nothing.”

He knelt one more time at the stump, but the Green Knight – Sir Bercilak – pulled him back to his feet. “Nay, Sir Gawain. Keep it. Wear it. Now you understand true honor, because now you understand shame. Honor is not about keeping rules, honor comes from giving your very self, without counting the cost. Go back to King Arthur. You have a tale to tell.”

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Jesus’ paradox was simple: *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who surrender their life for my sake . . . will save it.* In the earlier sermons of this series, we talked about what Christ did for us – that he laid down his own life for his friends, that he gave up everything to restore our relationship to God. But there is another side to that. What is our appropriate response to this great gift? Everything. Everything. Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Every part of our life that we withhold, everything, however small, of which we say, “This is mine; God shall have no part in it,” is a small death, a failure to live, a scar of dishonor. This is what Jesus taught and what an anonymous 14th century poet in the far northern hills of England understood. Only when we lay down our lives, as Christ did for us, can we truly live. That’s the gospel. Remember this: the gospel is not a doctrine. The gospel is a story. And the appropriate response to a story is not to believe it but to retell it. Amen