

LET'S TALK SOME MORE ABOUT GOD
(The Story of the Odd Sparrow)

(01/28/18)

Scripture Lessons: Psalm 139:1-18, 23-24
Romans 8:31-39
Matthew 28:20
Matthew 10:29-31; Luke 12:6-7

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Last week we began to prepare for Lent by examining some of our basic beliefs about God.

We began by looking at the matter of our human knowledge. We acknowledged that our finite senses and brain limit our ability to experience or understand the infinite. In all humility, we must admit that we can never know anything about God as God is in himself, herself, or itself, but only as this God has entered the realm of human existence, the realm of human experience, the realm of human history.

However, we do have the testimony of those who have experienced God, and we have our own experiences of God. Because all knowledge of God is ultimately subjective, different people can have different experiences and hence different concepts of God without one being right and all the others wrong. If there are many different ways of looking at a thing or a person, there must be infinitely more ways to understand the majesty and mystery of God.

We are also aware of the limitations of language when it comes to talking or thinking about God. Since we experience God as personal, we are inclined to use personal metaphors to describe God. We say that God *sees*, as if God had eyes; we say that God *hears* as if God had ears; we talk about people sitting on the right hand or the left hand of God as if God had hands. These anthropomorphic descriptions of God are meaningful because we are humans. Creatures living in other parts of the universe probably picture God as looking a lot like them. We tend to assume that we are made in the image of God, then God must look a lot like us.

Cultural anthropologists have discovered that in ancient times God was pictured as a fertility goddess with many breasts, e.g., in the statue of the Venus of Willendorf, for the people of that time and culture experienced and pictured a God who was like a Great Mother, giving birth to and feeding her creation. Later peoples pictured a masculine God who dwelt on the top

of mountains, a God who accompanied them into battle. Michelangelo pictured God as a very muscular white man with a beard surrounded by women, perhaps goddesses, reaching out from his realm in the clouds to give life to Adam.

Anthropomorphic images of God are meaningful and helpful for some people. For others, this concept of God seems too limited, too divorced from reality. It is this latter group that is of particular concern to me, those individuals who turn their back on religion because they hold a picture of God that science or common sense dictates they need to revise or discard. I find it unfortunate that those individuals often end up throwing the baby out with the bath water.

So we need to be aware of the limitations of our language and our pictures of God, for example, the assumption that God is a man. The real God, the bottom level God, the God beyond all the tribal Gods whom people have worshipped throughout history is neither male nor female, neither masculine nor feminine, neither white nor black. We need to be careful that our limited image of God, whatever it is, does not make it impossible to believe, as I find it does for many, or limit our understanding of powerful spiritual practices like intercessory prayer.

Even here in America (perhaps *especially* here in America at the present time!), we need to look at the phenomenon of tribal Gods. Throughout human history various groups of people have assumed that God belonged to them and no one else; that God loved them and no one else; that they were saved and everyone else was damned. The ancient Israelites believed that God was the God of Israel, and that “There is no God in all the world but in Israel (2 Kings 5:15).” This type of God seems to me to be a tribal God, a very small and limited God, not the God beyond Gods, the God to whom I believe Jesus points.

The Christian Church later picked up on this tribal dynamic in its assumption that God was the God only of Christians, no one else. Then various groups within the Christian church decided that God belonged only to them, and that only people who belong to their particular group are saved. When missionaries who come to my door tell me this, I respond that we are worshiping different Gods. The God I worship is a little bigger than the one that they describe.

This phenomenon of mistakenly regarding a tribal God as the true God, the God beyond Gods, is not limited to Jews and Christians. It is said that the followers of Mohammed cannot pray unless they have learned the prayer in Arabic, for Muslims believe Allah only hears prayers in the “sacred tongue.” This makes Allah seem like a tribal God to me, a God only of Muslims.

This kind of tribal thinking seems to be especially characteristic of monotheistic religions. I believe that the adherents of monotheistic religions have been responsible for every single religious war that has been fought throughout human history. If this is true, then these tribal Gods with their mandate of conquest and forced conversions have caused a tremendous amount of unnecessary suffering!

We are limited in what we can say or think about God because there is an element of mystery to God. God is not a thing in the universe that can be located and described. God is a spirit, a spirit that fills the entire universe, giving rise to not only the historical creation but to the ongoing creation in us and in the world. This God is sacred, shrouded in mystery.

Today I would like us to explore this mystery by looking at God in terms of several pairs of opposites, some of the dichotomies by which God has been described and experienced in our own tradition.

God has been described as the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. I believe God is the beginning and end of the universe. I also believe God is also the beginning and the end of our individual lives.

Before you were born, you were with God. When you die, you will once again be with God. But you don't have to wait until you die to be with God. God is all around you, is with you, and is within you every minute of your life. In our worship, in our prayer, in our openness to the beauties of nature, in our being touched by the revelation of God in the Bible, in our relationship with Jesus, and in the beauty of love we experience the presence of this God. God is that realm from which we came, to which we will return, and which we carry with us and within us throughout our life.

Second, God has been described in the Judeo-Christian tradition as both transcendent and immanent. That God who brought this universe into being eighteen billion years ago, that God who is not confined to our little planet but fills the entire universe with creative power, is the transcendent God described in scripture. This God is so different from us that it is beyond human comprehension. As the theologian Karl Barth put it, "we are separated from God by the infinite qualitative difference." And yet, this transcendent God who is far above anything we can imagine is also immanent, is close to us, is closer to us than we are to ourselves. This God is such an integral part of us that without this God as the Ground of our Being, we would not be.

Isn't that both a powerful and a mysterious feeling? Think about it. The Spirit of God that flows through the entire universe also flows through you. This means that the God who created the stars is creating you today. This God may also be creating other life forms in this universe, other life forms that can come to know their Creator. This majestic transcendent God that is far beyond anything we can imagine is also Emmanuel, God with us. This God loves us so much that it not only became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, it is becoming incarnate in you and me today!

Third, God has been described as both impersonal and personal. The laws that God established for the universe are impersonal. If you jump off the top of the Empire State Building, gravity will take you to the earth very quickly. When you hit bottom, you will die. But don't take it personally. I don't think it would mean your time had come, but only that you had done something incredibly stupid.

As you know, because of my interest in science I am moved when I discern God's presence in the atom, in the smallest subatomic particles as well as the mysteries of black holes or parallel universes, in both organic and inorganic matter. The greatest scientists: Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton, Bohr, Heisenberg, and Einstein not only believed in God, they knew this universe would be impossible without God. One of our astronauts, Eugene A. Cernan, once said: "I am convinced of God by the order out in space."

One day Michael Faraday, a brilliant pioneer in electrical discoveries who received practically no formal education, found a few volumes of science in the bookbindery where he worked. After studying these in depth, he embarked upon experiments that were guided by his religious convictions concerning the world that God had created. It is any wonder that in 1867, with his dying breath, Faraday said: "I bow before that God who is the Lord of all."

Our religious tradition describes a God who is a great impersonal creative force in the universe, but it tells us that this God is also a personal God. It describes this God as like a mother and father to us. It tells us that this God has thoughts and feelings, that this God can be sad when we depart from the way. The message of the Gospel is that the God who became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth cares about you and me! The Gospel tells us that God loves you and me! It tells us that God is constantly trying to create us, to shape us through that love. To think that this transcendent impersonal God of the universe is also immanent and personal, that this majestic God knows me in my depths, is comforting and also a little scary!

Of course we need to remember when we talk about God as father or mother that God is not a man or a woman, but that at times we experience God like a father and at times like a mother. We also need to remember that God loves us with a love that is much deeper than anything we human parents can give to our children. We try to love our children as God loves them. We try to love ourselves as God loves us, with a love that is constant and unfailing even when we sin, even when we depart from the path.

The evangelist Mark Guy Pearse told of the time that he overheard one of his two sons admonishing the other: “We must be good or Father won’t love us.”

Calling the boys to him, Pearse said, “My sons, that really isn’t true.”

“But you won’t love us if we are bad, will you?” the boys asked.

“I will love you whether you are good or bad,” Pearse explained. “But there will be a difference in my love. When you are good I will love you with a love that makes me glad; and when you are not good I will love you with a love that hurts me.”

God loves us when we are good and when we are not good, when we try to deepen our relationship through prayer, worship, and a Christian life and also when we forget God and fill our days with trivia. God still loves us when we make ourselves God or build our lives around idols, but as with Mark Guy Pearse, it is a love mixed with sadness.

Because God is both transcendent and immanent, we believe that although we can *feel* separated or alienated from God at various times in our life, we are never really separated from God. This is why I find the 139th psalm so meaningful. I call it the “no separation” psalm. It says that no matter where we go or what we do in this life, God is there. God is present in the darkest moments of our lives, the places that feel like hell. This comforting message is echoed in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Paul tells us that nothing in this life will ever be able to separate us from the love of God. The God of whom the psalmist and Paul speak is not only transcendent, but immanent, not only impersonal, but personal. This is the God revealed in Jesus.

I believe the Christian church overemphasized the transcendent aspect of God, the sense that God stands apart from us, that God is viewing us, in the words of a popular song “from a distance.” The church created a problem with its emphasis on our separation from a transcendent God; then it presented itself as the solution. It told people that the only way to God was through the church. If the church is the only way to God, then this gives the church a lot of power. If we

are cut off from the church, we will go to hell. The Protestant church also overemphasized this distance, though the Protestants raised up the Bible rather than the church as the way to God.

Both of these traditions, in their quest for power, have downplayed the other side of the transcendent-immanent dichotomy: immanence, no separation. The psalmist and the apostle Paul tell us we can never be separated from that God who is the Ground of our Being. Even without the church, even without the Bible, and even without Jesus, we are in communion with God. The church, the sacraments, the Bible, and the teachings of Jesus may help us understand and enter into a deeper relationship with God, but, as the mystics throughout the centuries have known, there is basically no separation. There is basically no distance.

As Christians, we not only believe, we *know* that God loves us! We come alive in that moment when we realize, when we feel this love, and our lives are transformed. In closing, I would like to share the story of the fifth sparrow or the odd sparrow, a story that was shared with me by a Roman Catholic nun, a missionary to a Spanish-speaking country in Central America.

A little native boy in this country had become such a devout Christian that it was apparent from the way he lived his daily life. The missionary asked the boy what had made such a difference to him, how he had been convinced to become a Christian. The boy replied that it was all because of the odd sparrow, the fifth sparrow.

“I don’t understand,” said the missionary. “What odd sparrow?”

“It is this way, Senora,” said the boy. “In the New Testament which you gave me, I read in the tenth chapter of Gospel of Matthew that Jesus said, ‘Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.’”

Then I discovered in the twelfth chapter of the Gospel of Luke that Jesus said, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight.”

“I still don’t understand,” said the missionary.

“Well,” said the boy, “I began to think that Nuestro Senor (our Lord) Jesus Christ must have known the custom in our country to trap and then sell birds. As you know, we receive one *peso* for two sparrows, but if the buyer wishes to purchase four sparrows and gives us two *pesos*, we will throw in an extra sparrow. That extra sparrow, the fifth sparrow, is an odd sparrow, of no account at all.”

“Then,” said the boy, “I began to think that I am so insignificant, so poor, and so small that no one would think of counting me. I am like the fifth sparrow, the odd sparrow. And yet Nuestro Señor, our Lord Jesus Christ, says, ‘Not one of these little birds is forgotten by God.’ This touched me very deeply, so deeply that it made me want to build my life around the God that Nuestro Señor came to teach. No one but the true God could care so much that he would not forget even me.”

As we approach this Lenten season, even at those times when we feel like the fifth sparrow, the odd sparrow, something of little significance in the whole scope of human affairs, let us remember that God loves us, and that he does not forget even us. Let us remember that this great, transcendent God of the universe is also immanent and personal, Emmanuel, God with us, that this God is always with us and within us.

This is the message of the Gospel, the comforting presence to whom we turn in our prayer in these moments of worship and throughout all the wilderness experiences of our lives.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
The First Community Church of Southborough
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
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