

IT'S ABOUT LOVE—NOT FORGIVENESS!

(6/16/19)

Scripture Lesson: Luke 15:1-24

“But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” (Luke 15:20)

This past Tuesday Bud Hubley, as he is so inclined, opened our Tuesday afternoon Spiritual Exploration Reading Group with a question.

In our study group this past year we have been reading C. G. Jung's autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, focusing specifically on Jung's psychology of religion and how his insights can deepen our Christian faith. We are presently reading the section where Jung describes the visions he had while he was sick, on his death-bed, and his beliefs about life after death that are grounded in these experiences. I am not sure what Bud's question had to do with what we were reading, but Bud asked me if I thought God ever got angry with us.

Bud, by his own admission, grew up in a conservative branch of the Christian church, and his theology, for a good part of his life, was shaped by that tradition. Like many of us, he is in the process of working through his childhood beliefs to see what makes sense in light of the insights of science, philosophy, psychology, and other world religions, other spiritual paths. Bud grew up believing in a God who could be jealous, angry, judgmental, punishing, and vindictive. His religion was basically fear-based. God's judgment and anger was something to be feared and avoided at all costs.

As we begin every study group, I cling to the hope that we will be able to read more than one or two pages, and that we might even be able to finish the book by the end of the year. The problem is that during every meeting, someone raises a question. Someone articulates a *big* question, an existential question, a question of faith, a question that deserves an answer. I'm not going to say that it is always Bud who raises these questions, but he certainly does his share.

I do not have all the answers. In fact, I share many of the same questions. But I can sometimes point us in a direction that might lead to an answer. In response to Bud's question, I pointed to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for I believe that this teaching is at the heart of Jesus' gospel and contains the deepest truth about the nature of the God who became flesh in Jesus.

I believe there are limitations to our anthropomorphic thinking in relation to God, the assumption that God looks like us, that God has all the personality traits, all the emotions that we human beings have, only on a much larger scale. For example, consider the God who hid Moses in the cleft of the rock and then walked by with his back to Moses so Moses could see his back but not his face. That god, in the words of J. B. Phillips, the theologian who shaped my thinking when I was an undergraduate philosophy major, would be a god who is too small.

I believe in a God who created the entire universe and continues to create it, a God who created each and every one of us and who continues to create us. I experience this God as both impersonal and personal. I can picture God as a creative energy field that flows through me, an energy field that is incarnated in me, lives through me, cares about me, and even loves me. If I had to pick a metaphor to describe God's relationship with me, with all of us, I would use the metaphor of a loving parent. What a coincidence! That's the same metaphor that Jesus used!

I think this metaphor frames our understanding of the way God relates to our sins. There is a strain of Christian theology that holds the forgiveness of sin to be the primary dynamic in our relationship with God. It begins with the assumption that God wants us to be perfect, for only if we are perfect can we enter into God's presence. However, we are human, all too human. As the apostle Paul reminds us, "we all sin and fall short of the glory of God."

Since we cannot make ourselves perfect by our own efforts, since we are essentially sinners, this school of theology offers a supernatural solution. It assures us that God has taken all our sin and placed it on Jesus. Then, like the Old Testament scapegoat or the sacrificial lamb, God killed him in our place. If we just believe this, we are free from the oppressive weight of our sins. The problem is that this way of thinking is very strange. It defies belief (though some say it is at the heart of their belief). It is not something that a parent, especially a loving parent, would do to his/her children.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, also called the Parable of the Lost Son, presents us with another way of thinking about God and God's relationship with us. The parable appears only in the Gospel of Luke, indicating that it was part of an oral or written tradition in Luke's church that was not available to Matthew or Mark when they wrote their gospels. If it had been available to Matthew and Mark, I am sure they would have included it, for it contains the central element of

Jesus' teaching concerning the nature of God. In this parable, Jesus tells us that God is like a good, a loving parent.

The parable begins, like many fairy tales, with a father and his two sons. From the testimony of scripture, it appears that God often acts in what we would call a counter-cultural way, e.g., preferring the younger to the elder sibling. As we have discovered in our Sunday morning Bible study of the book of Genesis, we find this dynamic in the story of Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Joseph in relation to his ten older brothers. In Jesus' parable, the younger son, despite his follies, grows and matures spiritually through his journey more than the elder son who, in his desire to be the perfect son, the obedient son, never leaves home.

The younger son is not a bad or evil person. He is simply not content to stay at home, live up to his father's expectations, and fulfill his father's dreams. He wants to live his own life. He embarks upon a journey into an unknown world. The younger son exemplifies the archetype of the hero, the one who travels to far-off lands, engages in adventures, struggles, is wounded by life, and then returns to his people wiser and humbled by his experiences.

The younger son squanders his inheritance in dissolute living. He enjoys his experience of freedom, but he has not internalized the responsibility that attends adult life. He is not interested in working and earning a living. He is only too willing to live off an inheritance that was built by his father's labor. Before long the inheritance that served to insulate him from a central lesson about life has dwindled away.

The son's only crime is that he thinks and acts like a child. He does not know the importance of work. He does not know the pride that comes from earning his own way. He is not trying to make his own creative contribution to life. Sigmund Freud said that the two most important values in life are work and love. If we engage in meaningful, productive work, no matter how humble it may be, we are making a creative contribution to life. If we have someone we love and someone who loves us, we echo the heartbeat of the universe. Actually, Freud didn't say this last part about echoing the heartbeat of the universe; I did.

If we have both of these, according to Freud, we are living a meaningful life. If we have only one, the foundation of our life and our identity become shaky. If we have neither, our life will be empty and neurotic. We will fail to experience the happiness that comes from living our

life fully. Our soul, our deepest core, will not be shaped by the joys and struggles of both our work and our love. It will remain shallow and immature. Actually, Freud didn't say this last part about how work and love shape our soul; I did.

Alfred Adler, one of Freud's early followers who went on to become the founder of the school of Individual Psychology, added a third dimension to Freud's formulation. Adler tells us that what is important is love, work, and making a contribution to life, leaving the world a better place than how we found it. Carl Gustav Jung, one of Freud's early colleagues who separated from him to establish the school of Analytic Psychology, added a fourth dimension. Jung tells us that what is important is love, work, making a contribution to life, and our individuation, our inner journey, our spiritual journey. Now you know why I like Jung so much!

Alcoholics Anonymous tells us that sometimes we have to hit bottom before we decide to change. The younger son finally hits bottom. It is at the nadir, the lowest point of his life that he finally comes to his senses. The younger son is ashamed. He is living below the level where he should be living. From this realization arises an experience of genuine humility. From his harsh encounter with reality, the reality of life and his immature behavior, he undergoes a *metanoia*, a radical transformation.

The son returns to his father hat in hand. On the journey home he rehearses his reentry speech. He goes to his father as a penitent, knowing that he has no right to expect his father's forgiveness. The parable is usually presented as a call for us, like the younger son, to repent, to confess our sins, and to return to God, for if we do so, God will forgive us and restore us to a place of honor in his kingdom.

However, this isn't what happens in the parable! The father sees his son while the son is still far off. You see, the father was waiting for his son. Every evening he stood on the porch with the boy's mother looking off into the distance. When the father became discouraged and voiced his doubt that their beloved son would return, the mother would restore his faith. "He will return. I know he will return. And when he does, we will be here waiting for him."

When the son's emaciated form appears on the distant horizon, the father knows him immediately. No distance of space or time can deceive the eyes of love. The father doesn't wait for the son to come to him; he immediately goes to the son. In fact, he runs to him! Filled with compassion, he puts his arms around his son and kisses him. The Greek word that is translated

as “kissed” means to kiss tenderly. He kisses him tenderly because the boy is standing in rags, filled with shame.

The son begins the confession he has rehearsed on his long journey, how his selfishness and superficial values led him to squander the gifts that had been given to him by his father. The son tells his father that though he is asking for forgiveness, he has no right to expect forgiveness. He indicates his willingness to serve as a hired servant to prove to his father that he has learned his lesson. The son is willing to crawl.

However, the father doesn't care about the confession. He doesn't even listen to it, nor does he offer forgiveness. What he offers to the son is a love that is so strong and constant that it could never be damaged by the son's ill-advised and immature decisions.

The father would not spare his son the experience of making his own decisions and reaping the consequences of his actions, for this is how a child grows into an adult. In the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the shepherd searches for the lost lamb. In the Parable of the Lost Son, the father does not search for the lost son. He simply stands and waits. The son must come to his senses and choose to return. Paradoxically, both stories are accurate depictions of God's relationship with us when we become lost.

When the son returns, the father does not hesitate. There is not a moment to be lost. The “best robe” which is used to cover the boy's rags was kept for only the most distinguished guest. Giving it bestowed the highest honor. The ring that is placed on the son's finger means that the son is still an heir. The sandals that the father has placed on his son's feet are a symbol of kinship, for only slaves went barefoot. Remember the words of the old Negro spiritual,

*All God's children got shoes,
When I get to Heaven, I'm goin' to put on my shoes,
And walk all over God's heaven.*

This spiritual articulates the hope that in heaven black people will no longer be slaves.

The Parable of the Lost Son is usually regarded as a teaching about repentance and forgiveness. To be sure, the son is repentant. The realization of his immaturity is an important part of his growth. But there is no evidence that the matter of forgiveness even crosses the father's mind. He kisses away his son's confession. The story is not about sin and salvation, about repentance and forgiveness; *the story is about love*. The parable should really be called the Parable of the Good or Loving Father.

Jesus tells us that God is a far better parent than our earthly, human parents could ever be. As human parents, if our children were to make a mess of their lives, we would be sad. As we know, we are not able to prevent them from making ill-advised choices, nor would we do so even if we could, for our children have to live their own lives and hopefully grow through their struggles. Our hope is that, like the younger son, our children will one day come to their senses and begin to live their lives in all their fullness.

If at some point our children were to return to us bowed and beaten down by the struggles of life, hardships which they may very well have brought upon themselves, would we offer them our forgiveness? I venture to say this would never cross our minds. What we would offer them is our acceptance, our support, and our love.

If *our* relationship with our children is not centered in the dynamic of offense and forgiveness, what makes us think that our relationship with God would be built around this dynamic? If God is the loving parent, as Jesus suggests, God wouldn't focus on our sin as the central dynamic in our relationship. God would focus on the relationship itself, hoping that we can experience the constancy of a love that pulls us back to the center as often as we go astray.

God loves us just as much the father in the parable loves his sons. God loves us with a love that is constant and unswerving. This love cannot be diminished by anything we do or don't do in life. Even if we make a mess of our lives, the love is there.

So, in answer to Bud's question, I do not believe that God gets angry with us when we make mistakes or do something stupid with our life. God is waiting on the porch for us, just as the father waited every evening for his son. God does not offer us forgiveness, but a joyous love.

As Jesus tells us, all we have to do is turn around, open our arms, and receive it.

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