

OUR IMAGE OF GOD IS IMPORTANT

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July 19, 2015

2 Samuel 7: 1-14a

There are many things that we can learn about God, especially about how the Jews of David's time viewed God in today's passage. There are also many things in this passage that speak to our image of God and how we relate to God.

One of the greatest problems that have faced organized religion over the millennia is this urge to define and thereby restrict God. Just last week we had David dancing in front of the ark as it came to Jerusalem. This was where they believed God was in fact sort of a God in a box. This image of God was a tribal God who went with a specific group of people. In reality it is a very primitive image of God. Please remember that a great deal of the Hebrew Scriptures is a description of how the nation of Israel's understanding of God grew and changed over the millennia. There is no one definitive image of God in any of the scriptures.

Humanity for as long as we have history seems to have had an urge to domesticate God. That urge to somehow close God into a shrine as a way of controlling God has a long history. In that structure we can come visit God when we want to or need to, but then leave and feel free to ignore God the rest of the time.

This is an image of God who lives in our house/temple/church and is comfortable, safe. Follow the rules and God will give you the rewards you deserve. Marcus Borg called this a Santa Clause god. If you are good you get presents and if you are bad you get coal. The problem as the Israelites and every other faith group eventually learns is that this puts the power in our hands not in God's hands. This system falls completely apart when something bad happens to someone who we think is good, even ourselves. This image of God cannot survive a crisis.

Richard Rohr wrote earlier this week: There is no concept of God that can contain God. Your present notion of God is never it. [1] As Augustine said, "If you comprehend it, it is not God." We can only come to know God as we let go of our ideas about God, and as *what is not God* is stripped away.¹

Michael Curry echoed this in his sermon to General Convention and in several interviews. He clearly states that we must give up on the idea of controlling any member of the Trinity, God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit. This is a good thing

¹ <http://myemail.constantcontact.com/Richard-Rohr-s-Meditation--Meister-Eckhart--Part-II.html?soid=1103098668616&aid=37CS3HSr8vc>

because our understandings ultimately restrict what we believe God can do. This also limits what we might believe God might call us to do as well.

There is far more to this rather radical statement about God that we hear from the prophet Nathan. This passage gives us proof of just how radical the love of God is, far beyond anything David or Nathan could imagine. This passage changes the very relationship between God and the people of Israel.

With Abraham and Moses the relationship, the covenant with God was conditional. If you do this, I will do that. Fail and God will punish. Succeed and God will reward. Scholars refer to this as the Sinai covenant. This was in effect the Santa Claus image the Marcus Borg wrote about. What God promises through Nathan is the founding of a new and different type of covenant (Zion). This covenant is unconditional in contrast to the promise to Moses. This is truly the first instance of understanding the concept of grace, God's unconditional love, totally unearned and not based on merit. This is a huge step forward in understanding God for the Israelites.

Why is this so important? Because there are so many people out there and I dare say in here who are afraid of God. They follow the commandments out of fear of punishment rather than love. This problem knows no age limit. I had a man of 70+ years ask me why God was punishing him when his wife did not get better after an illness. He truly believed that her illness and lack of recovery was God punishing him for something he did. That is what his church had taught him.

Unfortunately I frequently run into people who believe that God only loves them when they somehow get it right, whatever that means. I suffered through some of this a long time ago. In large part this was because of what I was taught in Sunday School by well meaning people who were just wrong. I've looked people in the eye and asked them if God loves them and had them reply, "I don't know, I'm not sure or I think God wants to love me." This is when I know I have some serious emergency pastoral work to do.

This is common enough that just Saturday morning the post from SSJE happened to read as follows: "Love: That Jesus loves you may be old news stored somewhere in the archives of your soul. If pushed, you might say Jesus used to love you, or that Jesus' love for you is true with a qualification; however that qualification keeps you from completely embracing the truth of Jesus' love for you today. This is news for you, today, now. Jesus loves you."

-Br. Curtis Almquist

My heart aches when someone comes to me because a friend or a relative has said, "Well if all this bad is happening to you, you must have done something to make God angry." Yes people do say things like that. We have supposed ministers and people who claim to be godly people who blame disasters on God being angry because of well fill in the blank. You all know what I am talking about.

Or worse they think they are quoting scripture and say, well God only gives you what you can handle. I remember one woman asking me if that were true and then she said, "If it is I wish God didn't have such a high opinion of my abilities." Actually the bible does not say this. The passage says that God will give you what you need to handle the challenges that life will throw at you. But also be aware of what that incorrect quoting of scripture says about this image of God. This again is the image of God from a Far Side cartoon where God is sitting at his computer and deciding whether to push the smite button. For that matter a Facebook post showed up as I was writing this with God standing on a cloud with a lightening bolt in his hand. That's how common this image of God is and it is very destructive.

So much of the trouble we face in the church today is all the roadblocks we have built up that keep people out, keep them away. An exclusive image of God is one of those major roadblocks. This message to our culture that only certain people can experience God's love is very destructive to the kingdom. When what we know is that God loves everyone, no exceptions. That love knows no bounds no limitations. Jesus never said to hate anyone. He said to love everyone. It's that simple and that hard.

God has spoken to his people and the message is simple: God loves each and every person unconditionally even when we may not feel lovable.