

Our Father who includes us all

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The story so far.... Exe 32:1-14 Last week....

Moses goes up the mountain and brings down the law – literally written in stone.

Then he goes back for the regs – they take a little longer. The people think he's been gone too long and they get bored, or scared. They yearn to 'see' God. Perhaps the face of God...the other manifestations like food and water – just didn't fit their expectations; Their imaginations. Where was the face of God? The tangible? They might have felt forgotten or abandoned (nothing much was happening). They had travelled far and were in need a party! Coming out of the coma of COVID, I sense that people need a party. They want a celebration and a reason to celebrate. It makes sense. We are anxious and impatient.

But – back to the story...

They ask Aaron for an Idol and he doesn't hesitate...not for a minute...Didn't he read the book?

The first thing I asked myself is why a calf so I went to the Israeli School of Biblical studies and asked the question. We may have been too quick to condemn Aaron. It's a long story but the short version is that calves or bulls were seen as a divine link between divine and human and it was often used as a platform for statues. Pharaohs/kings were shown riding on a calf to demonstrate their divine connections. It is possible that Aaron was preparing a throne for God ...but that another story. Never the less, the calf was enough for the people and they got on with serious worship and revelry. They had a face to gaze upon.

Meanwhile back on the mountain, Moses is blissfully unaware. God fills him in on what's going on below and like me, He (God) is surprised at how quick they turned to idols. He tries to send Moses away so he can express his anger doing serious violence against humankind. Terminate! Terminate! This is drama!

Now we have our courtroom moment – Moses puts his case to god. As a good advocate, he has a 2-point argument.

1. This doesn't pass the pub test – the Egyptians would be laughing. You delivered these people from slavery so you could kill them in the desert. Frankly, says Moses, it will trash your reputation
2. AND, may I remind you that you promised Abraham. Issacs and Israel a great land, an empire that would be their inheritance *forever*. Who can trust a God that goes back on his word? YOU PROMISED!

And then depending on which translation you are using – the Lord relented or the Lord changed his mind! Based on Moses' case. What a lawyer! What a judge!

At least that's one image... the case for humankind. A courtroom drama.

I want to talk about God and relationship.

Right from the very beginning Moses has a relationship in dialogue. His God is as near as the burning bush. He is afraid to look upon him but not to talk back! Dialogue is a two-way street.

Moses had an intimate, brave and honest relationship with God. Like Jacob – they argue, they wrestle, they bargain and at times disagree but Moses is always a faithful servant. Both Moses and Jacob made demands and God relented. He heard them.

There is a myth that says your relationship with your father is reflected in your relationship with God. In all myths, there is always a kernel of truth. Certainly, if you have a gender bias towards the divine, your imagination will fill in details you don't even know you thought.

Is you God distant?

Laughing?

Warm?

Stern?

Judgemental?

Are you feeling crushed under the judging God or wrapped in the loving God?

(Pause)

Rachel Held Evans says "God did not give us an internally consistent book of answers. God gave us an inspired library of diverse writings, rooted in context..." The Bible avoids simplistic answers to complex problems. It is

almost as if God trusts us to approach them with wisdom, to use discernment as we read, to interpret and remain open to points of view. To debate.

(Pause)



This is a sculpture of my father – my stepmother Janet fashioned before he died. This is not his professional portrait – it's my daggy dad. Weekend dad.

I am one of many children but he made each of us feel like we were the only one. He treated us with respect. He encouraged us to debate – he wanted us to be able to put together a case for our position or belief. It is a Jewish tradition. In the Jewish tradition, inconsistencies in the scripture are welcomed...and lead to deep and invigorating debates. We are

invited to chew on texts.

When I look at this sculpture, I see the years weighing heavy on his brow. I see a sadness around his eyes but warmth and joy in his lips. I remember the keen intelligence and curiosity. I remember his humour.

But he never said 'I'm proud of you'.

Not like God said to as Jesus rose from his baptism

"This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased", (Mt3:14) That was not his way. He always held the bar a little higher.

When he died, he left a recording for us in each, it named and thanked each of his children individually for their unique gifts and what he had gained from them. How proud he was.

We all have our different experiences of 'father' and the Bible is confronting in the powerful and vengeful God of the old testament to the love and forgiveness in the New testament. Could it be like my father's brow that even God matures and learns?

“Moses served not only as a faithful servant, but as a patient voice insisting that justice is not justice unless it is administered in love.”¹ Is he teaching God?

And so we turn to Paul (Phil 4:1-9)

The end of Paul’s letter tells the Philippians you don’t need a party (or idol) to rejoice. Rejoice in your prayer! In fact, the text implies that rejoicing is prayer. He extolls the people to show their gentleness and develop disciplines that will keep them closer to God: Celebration, prayer, meditation and study. Our liturgies try and cover these things but Paul is saying – make these part of your life.

Think about these things – do these things – the spiritual life is a cooperative transformation of thought and action. It is a two-way street.

And finally

The wedding Banquet – Matthew’s Jesus parable is written in the inverse. That is – it is a lesson in what *not* to do. Modern law is almost always expressed in reverse – it only says what you can’t do – and that dates back to the Magna Carta. (No! I promise we are not going there)

Jesus is still trying to teach the disciples and followers how to *be* in this new way of loving. They have to reject the smugness that is inherent in humans when we become a club. Taken on face value – this parable reminds me of the church of the 50s that I abandoned. The hypocrisy of worshipping God while judging each other on the cut of their suit or the state of their marriage.

As with all these stories in Matthew there is a subtle dig at the Jewish leaders who were rejecting the Christian message and the messengers. Now the gathered are poor, unwanted and uncircumcised, in other words, not Jewish.

The congregation is wearing the garment of righteousness, of true discipleship, of those who will produce the fruits of the kingdom. Even with a fresh lot, the requirement to conformity is almost instantaneous. As soon as ‘different’ walks in the door, they are judged and tossed out. At this stage, I’d like you to replace ‘garment’ in your mind with trans-gender; tattooed; single parent, who ever is not here today.

The story may be trying to link that consistency between speech and life, word and deed is essential to those who call Jesus Lord. The parable prods the

¹Brueggemann. Cousar. Gaventa & Newsome(19995) *Texts for Preaching Year A*

audience to self-criticism and asks whether in our relationships we actually act out the respect and trustworthiness that we expect.

Are we able to be as inclusive as God ? – see each and everyone clearly and celebrate our differences?

Are we able to be as inclusive as God? Can we see each other, clearly, and celebrate our differences? Matthew's God has room for everyone in a time when the Jewish people thought they had a unique franchise. The danger of a new normal is it just reproduces the behaviour of the 'old' normal.

How quickly the oppressed become the oppressors.

In anxious times, we need certainty. We crave details and corporal evidence – even in the law – especially in the law. It is natural to want more rules – some easy black and white. We want to see the face of God at the very time when we should be looking inward for the divine in us. That sacred place in our hearts that guides our judgement and our treatment of others.

Lord though I cannot see you – I rejoice every day. Our Father who includes us all - May your face shine upon us, Forever and ever. Amen

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