

Do You Suppose God Is Really Like That?

The Prodigal Son's Father

From the series: Stories Jesus Told

Luke 15:11-24

Richard A. Rhem

Christ Community Church

Spring Lake, Michigan

March 28, 2004

Transcription of the spoken sermon

This Lenten season we are remembering Jesus, hoping thereby to experience God, and we remember Jesus not because he was alien, a God-figure from beyond that entered our history, donned our human nature and effected our salvation only to return to that eternal state. Rather, we remember Jesus because as John's Gospel said, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and that marvelous insight which is much more profound, I think, than anyone has ever plumbed, is that God has become human. So, in remembering Jesus, we are remembering a human being about whom our tradition has said, "There God is embodied."

A couple of weeks ago, Walter Wink was with us to suggest that our calling as human beings is not to become God-like, but to become fully human, because God is the only Human Being with a capital H and a capital B; and, that this cosmic process of billions of years has been evolving and has issued into this present state in which we are the products of that emerging process - alive, conscious, able to contemplate it all. That cosmic process of billions of years has culminated in the likes of us, but as Walter Wink reminded us, we are only primitively human, we are only human on the way, and if that insight of Jesus as the Son of the Man would indicate, then it is toward that full human existence that we are moving, by God's grace, in order that we might become human as God is Human. And so, in remembering Jesus, we are seeking to experience God.

Jesus is our story. There have been other human beings who have been overcome with encounter, who have been overwhelmed by some moment of epiphany, some rifting of the sky, some theophany, some manifestation of that Ultimate Mystery. Abraham heard a voice or saw a vision or had a dream and the instruction was to leave his family and his environment and go out. For Moses, it was a burning bush. The experience of the Buddha in enlightenment was not other than that, and Mohammed had visions which he then recorded in the Koran. Our window on God is Jesus and in John's Gospel again, in that conversation with Phillip, as we noted, Jesus said, "If you have seen me, you have

seen the father.” To look upon the face of God, look upon the face of the human.

And so, we have our window, Jesus, and it was Jesus’ life. But in his life, Jesus was a storyteller, and he told the story which I read a moment ago which is perhaps his most familiar and best-loved parable, the parable of the Prodigal Son. The story has a lot to say about the son, about human nature, but it’s more profoundly a parable about a prodigal God. It is a parable about the nature of God, for the father in the story is obviously God. As Jesus tells that story, he reveals his understanding, his sense of the nature of God. I want to think about that with you this morning with a question, and this is my question to you: Do you suppose God is really like that? The father represents God in Jesus’ parable. Do you think God is like the father in the parable? If the father image bothers you, if that is too much a throwback to an old, supernatural being beyond us, or if the father image as father bothers you, let it go. Think in terms of the Ultimate Mystery, or a source and ground of being, that abyss of limitless being out of which flows all that is. I don’t care how you think of it; image it any way you want to, it doesn’t matter. But, Jesus was talking about that which was ultimate. He was talking about Ultimate Reality. He was talking about the sacred, the holy, the Mystery. He was talking about God. I wonder, and I want you to keep asking yourself this morning, “Do I really suppose that that Ultimate, that God, is like that? Like the father figure in the story?”

The story is so familiar. There is the request of the younger son against all tradition and all decency, really, to have his inheritance ahead of time so that he can depart, and he goes off into the far country. Since we’re focusing on the father figure, I want you to simply note that there was total freedom given to the son. There was no injured pride. There was no weeping and wailing. There was no judgmental attitude. There was no alienation. Jesus says the son made the request and we know the request was contrary to family order. But, there was no protest. The father gave him his inheritance and he left without any brokenness, any estrangement, which says to me that the Ultimate Mystery in Jesus’ mind is that which offers freedom, total freedom, that we write our own script.

Now, when I say total freedom, I know I am speaking in a community where we have such ability to write our script. We are, of all people, most blessed with our resources, with our context. And I know that that is not true of millions and millions of earth’s children, so when I speak about the freedom to write our own script, I am mindful of the fact that that freedom has in some cases severe limitations. You perhaps have been reading again about women in Afghanistan immolating themselves, setting themselves on fire. Can you imagine? Can you imagine how tragic must be the human existence of one who would be driven to that kind of absolute desperation? Did you catch in the newscast last night that in Palestine the little children are collecting cards like our kids collect cards? Baseball cards, right? No. The Palestinian children are collecting martyr cards. Some Palestinian entrepreneur has created cards with the pictures of those who have been martyred. There were all these little children with their cards and they

were filling their albums with martyr cards. Can you imagine a child growing up who, rather than having baseball cards, has martyr cards? Or, that young lad, 14 years old, with a bomb strapped to him who was fortunately intercepted by the Israelis, a suicide bomber really not wanting to die? So, when I think about freedom to write our script, I know I'm talking to those of us who have so much, so much beyond so many of the world's peoples. There are limits to that freedom, but nonetheless, if there is no longer any freedom, there is no longer any humanity and so I would say that in the story Jesus tells, what he is saying in that getting over the yielding to the request of the younger son is that there is no absolute script that is written; there is no predestinated story that is unfolding according to some eternal plan; there is no sovereign, ultimate, absolutism in history. It is rather that we write the story with freedom in greater or lesser degree.

Do you think God is like that? Do you think that reality is like that? Do you think that our human experience is like that? We can go from the departure of the son directly to his return. We don't have to go into the far country and linger there, although a lot of great sermons have satisfied prurient interest about what went on in the brothels and the pig sties, but we don't really need to go there because this story isn't about the experience of the son. It's really about the father. And so, from that granting of freedom, we go to that gracious welcome, a welcome that if you knew the color of the local society, the father an elderly gentleman picking up his robe and running to meet the son, defies all of the local custom about dignity and honor and what is right and proper, the father who doesn't let the son get his well-rehearsed story out, but rather, embraces him with tears.

Eighteen months or so ago, a few of us were in St. Petersburg and I stood in the Hermitage before that huge canvas of Rembrandt's "Return of the Prodigal," and pictured there is that old man, his arms straight from his shoulders, the son stooping before him, with a welcome without recrimination, with a welcome without any sign of alienation, with a welcome without any word of rebuke, that spoke not at all of some period of probation, a welcome that simply was a reunion and a celebration full of love and grace.



Do you suppose that God is really like that? Do you suppose that the ultimate mystery of reality is like that? Well, if we would put it in contemporary terms that we have been talking about God becoming human, do you suppose that the cosmic process of 13 billion years has a bias toward love and grace? Would you think that maybe in this evolving process onto which stage we have emerged there is something intrinsic in the process itself that has a bias, a tendency toward love and grace, that kind of magnificent picture that Jesus drew for us? Or, would you say “No. No, a cosmic reality has no bias toward love and grace. It is a random process, a random, neutral process unfolding.” You may be right about that. But, if that is the case, we have emerged and one emerged about whom they said there is the embodiment of what is ultimate in the mystery of God, and that one told a story about this kind of love and grace and we have made that one our centerpiece, that one we say is our window on God; and that one spoke about that which is ultimate in terms of love and grace. So maybe it is a random process. Here we are; who would have thought it? Nobody directed it. That’s one possibility, but here we are and we can gather around a story like that

which says that the ultimate values are freedom and love and grace effecting reunion and reconciliation. So, whether the process has that within itself or we come on the stage and recognize that and invest it with ultimate meaning, it doesn't really matter. Whether intrinsic in the process or affirmed by us, love and grace and reconciliation and reunion are the Ultimate. Do you think, do you suppose that that's the way it is at the heart of things?

That's not the way it is in traditional religious understanding. That's not the way it is in traditional Christian understanding, for while in traditional Christian understanding the parable of the Prodigal Son is a piece of the puzzle, it is jammed into the blender with a lot of other stuff and what we get is an homogenized view in which you have to add some stuff to the parable of the prodigal in order to get a decent God. In the traditional view, there is something more that you have in the parable of the prodigal. The father who, in freedom, allows one to write one's own story, and with gracious openness receives that one back into the bosom of love, in traditional Christianity you have, and it's right at the heart of this season, you have the whole atonement thing and of course, the world will never be the same after Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ." It will take another whole generation to wash out that popularization of the very worst conception of the death of Jesus. But there that violent suffering, that horrible suffering of Jesus is a sign of the costliness of the sacrifice that was demanded in order for God to be able to forgive us. That's 180 degrees from the parable of the prodigal, for the father in the prodigal needed no payment, no pound of flesh nor pint of blood. The father in the prodigal parable simply, with heart broken with joy, received the son home. And that is 180 degrees from traditional Christian atonement theology which says yes, God is loving and because God is loving, God provided a way, but God is also just and therefore needed God's honor to be satisfied. Those two are in irreconcilable conflict. I see it more clearly every day of my life. Those are two conceptions of God. Those are two conceptions of Ultimate Reality.

In yesterday's paper, perhaps you read that the final volume of the Left Behind series is out. This is a series of novels about the last things, the end times, a dramatization of the Book of Revelation. It is a total misreading and misunderstanding of the revelation of Jesus Christ to John, the last book of the Second Testament. It is a literalization of that which is highly symbolic, and it makes that writing, which was aimed at its own historical context in a time of intense persecution in the early days in the Christian movement, into history written ahead of time of the last times; and it is a travesty of any kind of intelligent biblical understanding or interpretation. But, be that as it may, other than that, how did I feel about it? This is more serious. This is a book review. The title of the book is *Glorious Appearing, The End of Days*. Apparently, those few believers who were not raptured at the time that Jesus came to take them out of history, those who were left and those who were converted during the time of tribulation are hovering in a rock fortress, and this review says,

... This rock fortress has been protected by God time and time again, but now its inhabitants face a mighty army whose sole goal is absolute annihilation. This battle is the Battle of Armageddon, it is the battle of the end time. Armageddon is a valley in Israel and this is the final battle when Jesus comes and encounters Satan and Satan's hosts who have been, of course, afflicting the believers. Apparently this head dog is Carpathia and Carpathia himself leads the charge. But, he is no match for Jesus Christ who returns as prophesied to save the fortress. The battles continue with Jesus' words alone wiping out hundreds of thousands of troops. The culmination is at the holy city of Jerusalem fractured into three by earthquakes as Jesus wins his final victory. Judgment comes for followers of Satan, but it is the peace that Jesus brings to believers that touches the heart. While Jenkins' writing is swift and a bit colloquial, his use of scripture is truly inspired. Nothing but scripture is spoken by Christ, portions of the Bible that bring comfort, judgment, war and love.

That Jesus is a warrior. That Jesus slays thousands with his words. That Jesus wins the final triumph, and effects the salvation of those that believe and the eternal damnation of those he destroys. That Jesus is totally contrary to the Jesus who tells the story that we looked at this morning, where the Ultimate Mystery is love and grace, where there is no final "No," where the door is always open and the light is burning forever in the window. This is not just an incidental matter. This conception, the traditional conception of a God who needs a pound of flesh and a pint of blood, whose son will return as a warrior to destroy the wicked, this God is a God drawn by the myth of redemptive violence that ultimately the peaceable kingdom will be issued in by violence. Walter Wink used that phrase, the myth of redemptive violence. It is a totally different conception of the heart and center of reality, and in that myth of redemptive violence, you effect finally peace through war. President Woodrow Wilson had a dream of the League of Nations which his own Senate voted not to enter when it was established, but he led us into the First World War, a war to end all wars. More recently we have gone into Iraq in order to bring democracy into the Middle East and we continue to live under the delusion of the myth of redemptive violence. You may say to me, "Well, what is the other answer, then? Passivism?" I would say no, not passivism. It is non-violent resistance, and the cost of non-violent resistance may well be crucifixion and there may be hell to pay for a long time, but I'll tell you this - it is the way of Jesus and it is the only hope of salvation of the world. There will never be peace brought by violence if we believe Jesus. If we believe Jesus, then there is wonderful news and scary news. The wonderful news is that the ultimate values are freedom and grace and love, that love and grace alone transform. Violence can coerce. Violence can control. Violence can keep the demons at bay. Love and grace alone transform. Love and grace alone alter consciousness.

Jesus told the story about the Ultimate Mystery, God, being a God of freedom and grace. That's the good news.

The scary news is that it is in our hands. It is in our hands.

So, do you suppose that God is really that? Where did you get your image of God? Handed down, of course, as with all of us. But, isn't it time for us to receive those traditional images critically and then take responsibility for the choice we make as to what is ultimate? The choice we make will determine whether the human family has a future, whether the peaceable kingdom will ever be realized.

What do you think?