



Sermons from Northwood United Church

Let's have a good ol' fashioned heresy trial!"

Exodus 33:12-23, 1 John 4:7-12

Will Sparks July 12, 2015

May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the actions of our lives, be acceptable in your sight O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

From the very beginning for Moses, it was a question that did not have a satisfying answer. He had felt called, convicted. He had believed that the God of his people was impelling him to lead, to move things forward, to make a way. Do you remember that story of Moses in the desert. God comes to him in the form of a bush that is burning but not burning up. And Exodus tells us that he experienced a divine call to go back to Egypt and free the people from slavery. And remember? He asked for some kind of solid sign of God: "Who shall I say sent me?" He doesn't want to just show up and say God told me to lead you. I mean, how well is that going to work? And God says to him, "I am. Tell them 'I am' sent you." Or 'I will be what I will be' sent you.

I'm guessing that wasn't quite what he was looking for. A little too enigmatic. A little too coy and cryptic. I think he was looking for some kind of power- some kind of trick- some kind of undeniable evidence in word form that it was indeed God, the maker of the universe, the great and mysterious one who was behind it all.

But seriously, what was God supposed to say? What language works to name the un-namable, to describe the indescribable? What words are adequate when talking about the One, the More, the Mystery, the Presence?

Humans tend to want something concrete, a physical representation of that which cannot be described. At least that give us something to venerate- a statue, a monument, a temple, a golden calf that will evoke the kind of respect and awe and honor that we believe God deserves. But inevitably these physical things, this art calls short, and of course there is the danger of idolatry- that we might fall into worshipping the thing instead of the One behind the thing.

And if not physical representations, we look for people who we know are not God but who seem to stand in well for God and are a little more accessible- prophets, priests, messiahs, gurus. That can work for a while especially if they have that mystical charisma that we attribute to people close to God. But invariably, they turn out to be human. They have feet of clay. Like all of us, they fall short of the glory of God.

Well, if not a person, how about some words, a holy book, a teaching, a doctrine that we can hold on to as a tried and true way of talking about God. 'I am who I am' is too close to Popeye to make it credible. So we create creeds, theological works, poems and letters that then, when meditated upon become for us the kind of 'go to' ways of talking about what is so very hard to talk about. But over time, like art, words have limitations too. Metaphoric words come the closest in my opinion, but humans have a way of using words rigidly, literally, and even words can become idols. The ancient Hebrews, wordy as they were, had a tradition of not using vowels when saying the name of God because God cannot be named. They strung consonants together as a place holder word for that which cannot be put into words. Anything else would be idolatrous. The best description of the way words become idols is "the bible-believing church." Have you ever been asked if your church is a "bible-believing" church? Usually that is a way of asking the degree to which we defer to the bible as the sole authority of everything. Where that becomes

idolatry is when believing the bible replaces the mysterious and slippery work of believing in God, one who is far less definable than a book- even the bible.

You see the trouble is, we are human. We are limited. We can't see ourselves clearly much less the mystery at the core of it all. So every description of God that we muster up will be limited by the frame of life we live in. Back in the day, when white people went to places where white people had never been before, the locals wondered what they were seeing. They were outside their frame of reference, and God is always beyond the human frame of reference.

Which leads me to the cardinal practice of talking about God. Humility. Any time we talk about "the More" or "the One" at the core of it all, we need to do so humbly. Because we are not actually describing God really. We are making our best guess at words that will make a glancing reference to something so beyond words as to make our words inadequate at best, but more likely blasphemous. So in this question, check your arrogance at the door please. None of us can speak with authority on this one.

The second practice when talking about God is to beware of projection. Jesus is the one who gets projected on most often. Amazing how the great Italian painters and sculptors made Jesus look like the ideal Italian man. Amazing that in the same time period, artistic works from Africa had Jesus as a black person. And if you read late 19th and early 20th century theology, isn't it amazing that Jesus comes out looking like a treed wearing intellectual? We all do it. There is no way around it. We cannot get outside of our own frame of reference. And we do the same for God.

Did you notice the words used in the conversation between God and Moses in our reading from today? Again, Moses is called to lead the people a step closer to the promised land and again he wants a sign, something to tell the people so they know it is God who has asked them to pull up stakes once again and move. This time Moses wants to see God. And of course, God, the Holy One, the All Mighty, if you see God face to face- well, you wouldn't come out of it alive. So God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock, and puts God's hand over the cleft, walks past, and takes the hand away so Moses can see God from behind. Actually in the original Hebrew, Moses is allowed to see God's... well... backside, except the original Hebrew is less polite than that. Did you know God had a hind end? This is a lovely example of projection. God has a hand. God walks by. God covers the rock with a hand so it must be huge. And when God takes the hand away, Moses can see God's hinie.

We laugh at this knowing that God doesn't actually. But if you listen to the words we sing, and the words we pray, and the way we talk, you will realize that we too are projecting our own stuff on God all the time. We create God in our own image more often than not.

Which brings me to the self-declared atheist minister from Ontario Gretta Vosper who made it into Douglas Todd's Vancouver Sun article last week that I heard some of you talking about last Sunday. Yes, I said atheist United Church minister. Gretta Vosper has made a bit of a name for herself with this claim and calling yourself an atheist minister is a bit arresting. Doug Todd is wondering why the church hasn't responded more decisively to this and speculates that the church's inaction is reflective of a terminal niceness that is killing us.

Now I need to declare a couple of things: 1. I have never met Gretta Vosper. I have read a few things of hers and some articles on her that also quote her. 2. I think it is exceedingly unhelpful in most conversations but particularly theology, to talk about someone without talking to them. Theology is a nuanced enough business that it is really easy to get misunderstood.

However I believe that Gretta's biggest beef with the church is the projections we make of God. She has grown so tired of a concept of God as the big guy in the sky that she believes even the word "God" is so laden with these projections as to become useless. She does not believe in a theistic notion of God. That is to say, any notion of a "person" or "being" that would be God is just projection in her view, and she doesn't believe in that conception of God. So

technically she is a-theistic- non-theistic in her theology. The way I understand it, it is not that she doesn't believe in "The More/ the Presence/ the One." It is that she is disavowing herself of any theistic notions- that God is somehow a person or being "up there, or out there." And to be honest, I have great sympathy for that part of her position.

I have struggled with the notion of God "up there and out there" all my life. It has never felt adequate to describe what I experience spiritually. And the church has had a hard time liberating itself from theistic notions of God. I used to think we needed a good ol' fashion heresy trial to jolt ourselves into becoming clear about what we mean when we blithely use the term God. Gretta's provocative approach may get me that heresy trial after all. But unfortunately, she has only dealt with half of the problem. She successfully de-constructs the old notions of God, but has yet to construct a theology that speaks to the heart of people's experience of the divine. She successfully describes what God is not, but has yet to re-construct a satisfying alternative way of talking about our experience of the divine.

I am grateful to her for the wakeup call. I am grateful for taking us half way to a new language. I hope she does not become either a villain or an heroic martyr for her approach. I believe there is room in the church to welcome her to the table. Her congregation does, and I dare say Jesus would. But we mustn't stop there. Surely we can find language that does not put God in a box, gives God neither hands nor hiniies, but gives voice to the mystery, the majesty, the awesome and the holy. Next week we will pick up where Gretta leaves off. Amen