

Because God Loves Stories

Given 6/26/2011 by Robin Mitchell

Author's Note: While I still stand behind most of what I wrote in this sermon, I now realize that I veered into what Barbara Brown Taylor calls "the language of contempt" in characterizing parts of the earlier Old Testament books. I talk more about this in a later sermon called, fittingly, "The Language of Contempt" (2/6/22), and then again in "Hearts On Fire" (4/24/22).

Meditation Reading

The name of [the] infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of our being is God. That depth is what the word God means. And if that word has not much meaning for you, translate it, and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about Him. You cannot then call yourself an atheist or unbeliever. For you cannot think or say: Life has no depth! Life itself is shallow. Being itself is surface only. If you could say this in complete seriousness, you would be an atheist; but otherwise you are not.

--Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of The Foundations*

Presentation

If there's one thing that sets humans apart from other animals – more than using tools, more than solving problems – it's telling stories. Instead of being homo sapiens, we might better be called homo once-upon-a-time-ians. An old Jewish saying asks "Why were human beings created?" and answers itself "Because God loves stories." And it's true; we are incessantly telling stories about ourselves, about each other, and, for as long as we have been telling stories, telling stories about God.

In our meditation reading Paul Tillich said that God could be thought of as "the source of your being, your ultimate concern, what you take seriously without any reservation", and to that I would add "the highest values, the greatest good, that you can imagine". And when people tell stories about God I think that's one thing they're doing; they're telling stories about the greatest good that they can imagine.

And this, I think, is a powerful act; it's not just spinning fairy tales. When we tell stories about something, even an imaginary something, we make our attitudes and assumptions about it visible in a form where we can relate to them and examine them. Once we tell a story we have to live with it, and if it's a flawed story – if the attitudes and assumptions it embodies don't reflect our deepest values – then we have to change it. We change our stories, and our stories change us, and if the stories are about our ultimate concerns, about the greatest good that we can imagine, then they change us deeply.

So let's look at our own UU tradition as a long history of stories about the greatest good that the storytellers could imagine. And since both Unitarians and Universalists came out of Christianity, which came out of Judaism, that means going back to the Bible for our earliest roots. And I know that some of us have mixed feelings about the Bible, but I want to look at it in a way that I think we can all agree with – as a historical collection of stories about God, of stories that reflect the greatest good that the storytellers could imagine in their place and time, told by a literate and highly imaginative people.

Viewed in this way the Bible is fascinating history. Because it contains thousands of years of stories, all preserved for us to read, it's like the Grand Canyon or other places on earth where something has cut deeply into the rock and you can see all of the old strata and read their history; see where the land was at the bottom of the ocean, where it was an ancient forest, and where it was a mountaintop.

Reading the earliest stories in the Bible, it appears that the greatest good the ancient Israelites could imagine was a tribal chieftain writ large. God appears as a leader who is praised for vanquishing the tribe's external enemies and for ordering society to keep the peace within the tribe, and is honored more for his raw power than his deep compassion.

Not all of this was bad – even in the beginning, the ideals the Hebrews externalized in the person of God stretched their consciences. In Leviticus, probably liberals' least favorite book in the whole Bible, God tells the Hebrews to love their neighbors as themselves, to work equal justice for the rich and poor alike, to provide for the poor and to treat fairly with strangers in their midst – ideals that our country is explicitly rejecting some 3,500 years later.

But in many ways, the God of Genesis and Exodus looks like a psychopath to our modern eyes. He kills the entire world, human and animal together, in Noah's flood. A few generations later he destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, killing everyone in them. When the Israelites are kept captive in Egypt he frees them by killing the first-born child in every Egyptian family and then drowns the Pharaoh's entire army in the Red Sea. As we tell the story now, it's a story of liberation that has given hope to oppressed people everywhere, but the story the Bible tells is darker. God hardens the Pharaoh's heart, preventing him from doing the right thing so that God can have the glory of forcing him to do it. Here is God speaking to Moses before parting the sea:

Lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go on dry ground through the sea. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen. Exodus 14:16-18

After God leads the Israelites to the Promised Land, he immediately starts helping them kill and drive out all of the tribes who were living there. Here is Joshua leading them to victory at the city of Jericho:

At the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so every man charged straight in, and they took the city. They

devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it – men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys. ... So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land. Joshua 6:20-21, 27

This is horrifying stuff; the God of the early Israelites is hard to tell from Saddam Hussein, except that God really was as powerful as Saddam only imagined he was. But remember that these are very old stories; they're the oldest layer in the strata back when the land was at the bottom of the sea. This is what happens when a tribal, honor-based society begins to externalize its values; you get a tribal warlord on a grand scale.

But the moment you start telling stories, you put yourself in relationship to them and the dialectic begins. You have to start explaining them, to yourself if no one else, and if the stories begin to shock your conscience then you need to find some resolution.

We see that happening almost from the beginning of the written story. In the book of Genesis, when God has decided to destroy the city of Sodom he tells Abraham what he plans. Now Abraham in these stories is completely faithful to God; he will later prepare to sacrifice his son Isaac when he thinks God is asking him to. But here, in one of the most amazing passages in the Bible, a human being rounds on God in moral horror:

...but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Genesis 18:22-25

"Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" This, I think, is what happens when you begin to outgrow your stories. The teller had to deal with God's destruction of the city, but he couldn't help but add his own protest. And God, it seems, is shamed; Abraham eventually bargains him down to ten innocent people as the price of the city. In the end they aren't found and Sodom is still destroyed. So the story comes to its ordained end, but not without a sign that a new consciousness is growing in the storytellers.

And indeed, the character of God begins to change as the moral consciousness of the Israelites grows. The prophets begin to appear, and with them the sense that God is more concerned with justice and right relationships among the people of Israel than he is with smiting their enemies. In fact, his anger is more and more directed at Israel for breaking his moral commandments than it is at their enemies – here is the prophet Amos, speaking for a God who once jealously demanded praise and sacrifices:

I hate, I despise your feasts,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
Take away from me the noise of your songs;

to the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
Amos 5: 21-24

And later, the prophet Micah with a gentler approach:

He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
Micah 6:8

Even the story of Sodom, which had vexed Abraham so greatly, is worked into the new vision of God – a thousand pages after the city is destroyed, the prophet Ezekiel finds the reason:

Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were
arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy.
Ezekiel 16: 49

(When the culture-warriors accuse America of promoting sodomy, they have no idea how right they are!)

So the stories progressed as the teller's sense of good expanded from the glory of the tribe to the goodness of its ethics. With the coming of Jesus the stories moved forward again – while God's laws had increasingly demanded compassion, Jesus went further by showing that when the laws conflicted with compassion, compassion won. And Jesus completed the rejection of seeing ultimate good as a tribal war god who smote your enemies:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that
you may be children of your Father in heaven. ... If you love those who love
you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?
And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?
Matthew 5: 43-47

And beyond that, he and the early church changed the stories about God in two fundamental ways that seem to me like the first glimmerings of Unitarianism and Universalism.

Although the Jewish concept of God had been growing in compassion, he remained awesome and distant; the gulf between humans and God was immense and absolute. No man could look on God and live – when Moses went up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, the people were warned not to set foot on the mountain or they would be killed, and even the later prophets were harshly purified by God before they could speak his words. But Jesus called God abba, the familiar form of 'Father', and told his followers that the kingdom of heaven was within them. While his vision of ultimate good still placed it in an external being, it was a first step towards breaking down the dualism that modern UU-ism has largely rejected.

And the early church even more drastically changed another of God's attributes. God until this point had remained solely the God of the Hebrew people, of Abraham's descendents, even as he became less militant on their behalf. Their stories about ultimate good still involved only their own tribe, but the early church widened this

dramatically. In the first appearance of Universalism, the church founders imagined a vision of good that could include everyone on earth. As the Apostle Paul wrote,

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

Today we are apt to stop at the words "Christ Jesus", but the important words are "you are all one." This leap from a tribal good to a universal one was one of the greatest innovations in the history of our faith.

And there the Bible ended and the Church began telling stories about those stories. For over a thousand years the stories largely went backwards; it seemed that the greatest good the Church could imagine mostly involved killing infidels and enriching the Church hierarchy. There were still prophetic voices, including our own UU ancestors, but they were mostly trying to reclaim older, better stories rather than creating anything radically new.

But then new things again emerged. In 1568 the King of Hungary, prompted by his Unitarian minister, issued the Edict of Torda establishing religious freedom in his domain. It didn't last – in the ensuing backlash he was deposed and the minister died in jail – but for the first time in the West, ultimate good had been seen as beyond the grasp of any one sect. (The Muslims, ironically in today's world, had done this even better almost 1,000 years earlier, but this was a big deal for our tradition.)

In the Twentieth century the influence of humanism changed our story yet again, and some of us in what were by then thriving Unitarian and Universalist denominations began to have visions of an ultimate good that was inherent in us, not located in some external, supernatural being.

And with that, we have the modern UU story about God, about the highest good that we can imagine. It is not separate from us, it does not exclude any of us. It is a grand story, a story that people have died to be able to tell, a story we should be proud to tell to the world.

But is our UU story about God finally complete? I don't know, but I hope not. We still need to be open to change – imagine where we would be today if the ancient Israelites had been content with their stories, and then consider the responsibility we have for the stories our great-great-grandchildren will be telling. The main complaint I have with fundamentalist Christians isn't that they love God, or even that they seem so sure of themselves; it's that their stories about God often seem to be stuck back around the battle of Jericho while the rest of us have moved on.

Certainly our stories don't have to be complete. Look at our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and imagine how different a story about ultimate good it would tell if it were the inherent worth and dignity of every living being instead of just every person. Or the dialog our denomination is having about how we confront structures of oppression, the people and institutions behind them and our own complicity in them; questions that make us carefully calibrate our stories about action and compassion, about comfort and growth.

And there are the stories that we tell each other here in the amphitheater every Sunday, stories about our relationships with each other, with the community, with

our political and religious opponents. Are these stories as healthy as they could be? Do they really reflect the greatest good that we can imagine, the highest values that we want to embody?

Because these stories matter, as much for us as they did for the ancient Israelites. Like them, our stories shape us as we shape our stories. The philosopher William James was talking about ideals when he wrote the following, but the point applies just as well to stories:

"All the higher, more penetrating ideals ... present themselves far less in the guise of effects of past experience than in that of probable causes of future experience, factors to which the environment and the lessons it has so far taught us must learn to bend." The stories we tell are not so much about our past, but about our future. As he says, they are the probable causes of our future experiences, of the world we will find ourselves living in.

I once got a T-shirt at a Methodist retreat that says "May my words be as sweet as honey, for tomorrow I may have to eat them." May the stories we tell be as sweet as honey and as true as our hearts, for tomorrow we will be living them.

May that be so.