

“Our 7-Sided God”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to begin today by talking about one of the most interesting classes that I took when I was at seminary a number of years ago. The name of the class was simply called Pastoral Issues. It was taught by Professor Peggy Way, who had been teaching that class for a long, long time. This class, Pastoral Issues, was about all the complicated issues that we face in our lives and all the complicated issues that pastors encounter in their ministries, so conversations in this class were nothing but interesting. We talked, among other things, about drug and alcohol addictions, divorce, family tragedies, death, infidelity, sexual abuse, money problems, domestic violence, and the list went on, and on, and on. I can tell you in my years of ministry I have encountered every single one of those issues that I just listed.

Now, throughout all our conversations, there always came a point when Professor Way would conclude the discussion with a summary statement that went something like this: Life is messy. Life is messy. When she did this, when she sort of brought the conversation to a conclusion like this, it always felt to me like some kind of statement of resignation, like life is messy, oh well, nothing we can do about it.

I think, for me, at that point in my journey, and for many of my fellow students, we felt like life shouldn't be messy. In fact, we felt like life ought to be orderly, that there ought to be clear lines about right and wrong, firm expectations about proper behavior, and people need to do the right thing and be rewarded for it and, as for bad behavior, we tolerate too much of that, so there was always tension in the room when it came to the idea that life is messy.

At our church in Tennessee, we had a seminary student, who went off to seminary to study to be a pastor, and this seminary student called me one time in the course of her first year there. She said, with a sort of exasperated voice “You won't believe, Tom, what's going on in our dormitory”. This was the women's dormitory. She said “You know, one of my seminary students, who is married, has a man coming into the dormitory late at night and sneaking out early in the morning”. She couldn't believe it. My response was “Welcome to ministry. Life is messy”.

Well, this idea that life is messy sort of bumps into an idea that perhaps God is not, that perhaps God is not messy and perhaps that God is, maybe, orderly.

As we read in Exodus 34 today, we bump into that God. It is the story of new tablets being given to Moses and, if you remember in the previous Chapter, Moses had come down and thrown down the tablets because he was so “ticked off” at his fellow Israelites for dancing and celebrating around the golden calf. Moses had gone up to see God at Mount Sinai only a moment, and it took that long for the Israelites to build a new idol and have a party, so Moses was “ticked” and the tablets were broken, and it was a difficult time for Israel, but in this new story in Exodus 34, we are reintroduced, in a sense, to God. There are new tablets now that have been drawn up, and in this passage from Exodus 34, there is a series of descriptive phrases about this God, about Yahweh. There are, in particular, 7 positive phrases about what this God is like, so what we hear about Yahweh, this God of Israel, at first is very comforting. This God is described by 7 words, beginning with the word “merciful”. That is to say that God is mild and kind and compassionate. God feels with our pain.

Phyllis Trible, a feminist theologian of the Old Testament says that the Hebrew word for “merciful” is “rahim” which means “womb”, which is to say that God is oriented towards Israel with a womb-like motherly love, a womb-like motherly love.

I love this God. This God is like my mother who cares for me, sends me off to school and welcomes me home when I get back. This God is gracious. This God is completely gratuitous. This God is offering unmerited favor to Israel, unmerited favor to us. We have done nothing to deserve this grace. There is nothing we can do to earn this grace. There is nothing we can do to lose this grace. This is our God's gift to us. God is merciful and gracious.

Then, in this list of 7, number 3 is my favorite. This God is slow to anger. The Hebrew word here for "slow to anger" means "long nosed". God has a "long nose" like Pinocchio.

As I read about this "long-nosed" God, I discovered what is meant here is that whatever heat of rage that God may feel for God's people, it has a chance to cool off because it must be breathed out at a long nostril, so by the time the flames of God come out, they have cooled down because God's nose is so long.

I experienced that "long-nosed" God once in a while in my dad. In fact, I was reminded of that story of when I took out our snowmobile. You know, we lived up in New York, and we got around on a snowmobile in the wintertime. I, for some reason, took out an old buddy of mine, who, apparently, I only liked a little bit because I took him way out into the golf course where we lived, and I dropped him off there out on the golf course, took off, and never went back. Well, my dad got word of this mistreatment that I had done to this young friend of mine, and I heard he was storming home from where he worked a few blocks up the street, and I went into defense mode up into my bedroom and buried myself, wept and wept, waiting for the wrath of God, and when my dad came up into my room, he saw me sort of weeping like a baby, and all he could do was stroke my head, saying "It's okay". The flames had gone out. He was cooling down as he saw me weeping. I wonder if that is not sort of like God in Israel.

In this description, God is abounding in steadfast love, another description of this God. There is a loyalty to the relationship. They call it biblically the covenantal relationship. God will put up with a whole bunch of less than great behavior from Israel, from the Israelites, and God will do this in order to salvage the relationship, and parents know about this. Parents know that sometimes you have to put up with behavior from your children that just doesn't really set you straight, but you just put up with it for the sake of the relationship, so God is abounding in steadfast love. God puts up with a lot.

God is filled with faithfulness, number 5. That is to say, God is a God of complete reliability—always there, always waiting for us, always present, always faithful. God never abandons us.

The last 2 descriptions of this God in Exodus 34 say that God is keeping steadfast love. God's love continues to operate for a long time, and the description here is "for the thousandth generation". God's love never, ever fades away. Then, the last description is that God is forgiving. The Hebrew word here is "nasa" which means "to lift", to relieve people who violate their relationship with God, to relieve them of the burden of their sin, so God lifts that burden off of God's people, offering forgiveness and allowing us to live without that, sort of, yoke around our necks.

As I read through those 7 descriptive phrases for God, the biblical God, it occurs to me that this is a very useful, and a very comforting, God. We feel okay about that God, and when we write books about that God, we want to make God just that good, and we'd like to keep it clean, orderly and nice, but I hope you heard the rest of that scripture because the description of God after those 7 descriptive phrases then starts to get messy. It says this: God is nice, God is faithful, God is steadfast, God is loving, God is forgiving, God has a "long nose", yet, by no means clearing the guilty. The Hebrew word there basically says that God will not acquit. God doesn't let the guilty off the hook, and this takes the form of a grammatical phrase called an "infinitive absolute" which is to say that God will not only not pardon, but God will REALLY not pardon, He is REALLY not going to do that. It's sort of an emphasis point in the Hebrew that says "Oh no, not going to pardon". It's to reaffirm that you don't read it wrong. Then it goes on to say after "not going to clear the guilty" that God will visit covenant sanctions, which we might want to think of as consequences or judgment.

God will visit covenant sanctions upon the community of faith for generations to come through the parents and their children, and their children's children, and you'll want to ask the question "What happened to the steadfast love?"

Now we are seeing, all of a sudden, judgment and judgment upon generation, and generation, and generation, so all of a sudden God doesn't just have a "long nose", but God has a long and powerful memory of being wronged. Of course, what we want is a God of easy forgiveness, forgive and forget. That's what we long for. We long for that in God, and we long for that in relationships, forgive and forget, but here's what we learn about God, I think, in this text. We learn that God knows that forgiveness is not that easy, that, in fact, forgiveness takes hard work and honesty to make it happen, that to forgive and forget is actually cheap grace, and real forgiveness takes hard work. What God knows is that, though we may work through our feelings and arrive at a place of forgiveness, we are, nonetheless, forever changed by that original violation that we have experienced.

To give you an example of how I think that plays out in real life is to talk about a United Church of Christ pastor I know, who has now passed away, and his name was Roger Robenault. Mary and Jim Lillie were part of his church back in the day. Roger Robenault was a United Church of Christ pastor. He was also a very fantastic writer, a published writer of many books. He was a nationally known storyteller, and he was the victim of childhood rape. He would write about this in a variety of ways, and he would tell stories about this, among other things, and he would talk about getting to a place of forgiveness for what had been done and for the way that he had been violated. After he had told his story of being raped, people would come up to him and say "Roger, how is it that you don't strike out, how is it that you are not filled with anger for what has been done to you, how is it that you're not a man of violence?". He would say "If I give in to violence, the rapist has won. The rapist does not win if I remain in a place of forgiveness", but Roger would tell you that, although he got to a place of forgiveness, his life was forever changed and, because his life was forever changed, his children's lives were forever changed, because they experienced their father as that recovering person from that violation, and their children were changed.

Who we are, the experiences we have in life, the blessings we experience, and the violations we experience are transposed to our children—not necessarily as a negative, but as a reality because we are, in our fullness, the product of our lives, both good and bad. We take our wounds with us, and we either heal from those wounds and learn, and pass those learnings on, or we continue to have our lives dictated by those wounds and go on to wound others, and I think we get very close at this point to the essence of God because, at the heart of this text in Exodus, there is a profound and unacknowledged contradiction. God is, in this text, contradictory. God, in this text, forgives inequity, and God punishes inequity.

An Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, says in this text that God is inclined to be utterly for the other, utterly for God's people, utterly for the Israelites, utterly for us, utterly for humanity—that is, God's character, and, at the very same time, God is characteristically for God's own self. What Brueggemann says is that this contradiction makes the God of the Bible interesting, credible and dangerous. This God is interesting because one does not know ahead of time who God will be or how God will act. Just think about that statement for a minute. If that is true, that we do not know who God will be or how God will act, think about how disorienting that is as we think about God.

Brueggemann says that this text makes God credible because this contradiction corresponds fully to the way we find our own life with others being enacted. Relationships, life is messy, and God is in the midst of the mess. I just cannot believe that God is outside of our lives, God is in there struggling with us in all the pain, in all the struggles, and all the kinds of mess we have in our lives, that God is in the middle of that, and that God is dangerous because, just as we think we have God figured out and predictable, this God surprises us and keeps us off balance.

How I read this text in Exodus 34 is that Israel and the Israelites understood that God is not outside the mess of our lives, that God is not like some unbiased, highly-trained counselor, who talks to us as

we sit on the couch, but that God is actually highly invested and very biased about his relationship with humanity. God is biased for us and, because God is biased for us, God cannot leave us alone in our relationships in our day-to-day struggles, as God could not leave those Israelites alone in their struggles.

As the great Old Testament theologian, Terence Fretheim, puts it, he says “Our God is a God who suffers, a God who suffers with us, and for us, and because of us”. That is how intimate this God is, and if God is like anything—and it’s always dangerous to say God is like because, at that point we have limited God—but if God is like anything, I suspect that God is, indeed, like a parent.

My experience of parenthood (and I am sure that most of you would nod in agreement) is that, as a parent you are always worrying, you are always giving, going to pick up the kids, giving them money, getting them dressed, doing their laundry. You are always half angry at your kid. They are never doing exactly what you want them to do but, at the same time, you are always loving. You are always loving your kid, even when your kid does the worst thing possible on that day, there is still love present in the anger. I think perhaps that is what God is like—like a parent who is so wrapped up in that relationship that God just can’t separate God’s self from that reality, and I think in that reality is the good news that God is not separate from our struggles. God is right there in the messiness of life, that God holds us accountable and sometimes even thinks “I told you so”, and the good news is that, all we have to do is know that God is there in the struggle and we have to listen, listen and take direction.

How many kids grow up at age 48, like I am, and say, you know, my dad was right about a couple of things? I didn’t think so back then, but now I know my dad and my mom were right most of the time, actually. So, that is the good news, and we give thanks to our God, our God who is not separate from our trials and struggles and pains and joys and celebrations, but a God who is right there in the mix with us, and we give thanks to the beauty of this life and for the mess, and for the mess and beauty that God is very much involved with, and we give thanks to that God who is with us throughout it all. Amen.