

SERMON: “RE-THINKING GOD”

NORWALK CHRISTIAN CHURCH

19 JULY 2015

I KINGS 19:9-18

And the word of the Lord came to him: “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

[10](#)He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

[11](#)The Lord said, “Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”

Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. [12](#)After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. [13](#)When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

Then a voice said to him, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

[14](#)He replied, “I have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left, and now they are trying to kill me too.”

[15](#)The Lord said to him, “Go back the way you came, and go to the Desert of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael king over Aram. [16](#)Also, anoint Jehu son of Nimshi king over Israel, and anoint Elisha son of Shaphat from Abel Meholah to succeed you as prophet. [17](#)Jehu will put to death any who escape the sword of Hazael, and Elisha will put to death any who escape the sword of Jehu. [18](#)Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose mouths have not kissed him.”

JOHN 4:23-25

...[23](#)"But an hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers. [24](#)"God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." [25](#) The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming (He who is called Christ); when that One comes, He will declare all things to us." ...

Good morning: It is a genuine pleasure to be with you this morning, and I am deeply grateful to Pastor Travis for giving me the opportunity on this particular day to preach, for what may be the last time. It was on this day 38 years ago that I was ordained to the ministry at Capitol Hill Christian Church in Des Moines.

It has been quite a ride. Some of it bumpy, much of it joyous. I am sorry that health issues have forced me out of the active ministry, but I am grateful to other ministers like our own Pastor Travis and Dr. Tim Diebel, and Rev. Dayna Kinkade, and others, friends and colleagues, for giving me opportunities like this from time to time.

This morning, my thoughts go back farther than just 38 years ago, to a Sunday morning Sunday School class, of which I was a member when I was in Junior High School—for you young people of today, that was sort of like Middle School. The teacher was a lovely lady with a nice smile, an earnest air, and hair always done in a perfect style, with not a single silver strand out of place. Every Sunday morning, she would come to class with her teaching notes meticulously written out on tissue-thin writing pad paper. My friends and I gathered around the table to listen to her expound on the subject of the day, whatever it might be.

The trouble would start when we began asking questions. The material she was teaching us was at odds with so much of what we learned in science class in school. When we asked a question that started with “How did...” or “Why did...” She wouldn’t even try to offer an answer. Instead, she would burst into tears and class would be pretty much over. My friends and I would spend the rest of the Sunday school hour talking about stuff that was genuinely interesting to us.

Finally I could stand it no longer. I made many vociferous complaints to the pastor of the church, who happened to be my dad

but all to no avail. Neither he, nor the Education Committee, nor the Church Board ever did anything to replace her. Consequently, for all the years since, I lived with the constant tension between religion and science. God bless my parents, they both encouraged me to ask hard questions at home, and they did their best to answer them. They both believed in the power of science, but whenever they had to choose, they always came down on the side of religion. And, as far as I know, Dad did nothing to replace that teacher. I was about to write letters to Congress, the Supreme Court and the President, but then we moved away and I figured it was not my problem anymore.

And that tension then was nothing like it seems to be today. Among other things that divide and segment our American family, people seem to be split along the lines of science vs. religion. Each year, at the Iowa State Fair, one church denomination puts up an elaborate display which “proves” that dinosaurs never existed. Pope Francis recently made remarks directly counter to the climate-change deniers. And parents are jeopardizing their own children as well as other children by refusing to get their own kids vaccinated.

Then, one day last February, as I was waking up from my night’s sleep, it occurred to me: We’ve been looking for God in all the wrong places! We say, “God is everywhere,” but we picture God up in heaven, or all around us, in nature, sitting on his throne, waiting for us to come sit in his lap and ask for stuff, just like kids do with Santa Claus at Christmas time, you know they day we celebrate the birth of Santa Claus.

When I woke up that morning, I remembered the story in I Kings about the prophet Elijah who found God, not in the big dramatic events of nature like earthquakes, wind and fire, but rather in the “still small voice” from within himself.

And right after I thought of that story in the Hebrew Bible, I thought of Jesus' comment to the Samaritan woman: "God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth."

The more I thought about it, the more excited I became, as the ball of tension between science and religion inside me melted away.

But then I started thinking, "So what?" If God is the divine spirit, or the spark of divinity within every person, what does that mean for us trying to live together, in community—Central Iowa, the United States of America and in every other country around the world? I started thinking and it wouldn't stop. I started writing a book about the whole re-thinking process, the first draft of which I finished about 10 days ago.

Actually, it means a whole lots of things for us as we try to live our lives in the 21st century.

First, of all it means that no matter what color, or nationality, or gender, or sexual orientation, God lives within each and every person. When we disrespect or discount a person or group of people for any reason, we deny and diminish God, who gave us all life.

I have found myself using the analogy for some time...some people drive Fords, some people drive Buicks, some people drive Nissans. No matter what their names are, they are all still cars.

Just so, some people of the world worship God, some worship Allah and some people worship people worship Yahweh. No matter what we might call God, it is the same God the whole world around. To discount a person or group of people because of their nationality or their religion or for that matter their social or economic status, is to deny that a part of God which is in them, just as it is with us.

And what about Jesus? In this paradigm, this journey from Out There to In Here, Jesus is portrayed in the gospels as the one person in whom all the best of God resides. Jesus said 'No one comes to the Father but by me.' I take that to mean that to achieve truly God-like life, we must work to cultivate truly Christ-like lives. Jesus is reported to have said, "The father and I are one." In other words, the way Jesus lived out his life once he started his public ministry showed people the best qualities of the God who dwells in us all: Love, compassion, selflessness, mercy, humility, radical obedience, peacefulness, non-violence and other qualities we find him displaying throughout the stories of his life.

So why can't we do that? Why can't we be like Jesus in this day and time? What gets in the way of a Christ-like life is something a seminary professor and friend of mine used to call the "Crust of Enculturation." Many people would call it sin...but let's be clear: sin is not a matter of breaking rules or misbehaving; the root word that we translate as sin comes from a word that meant to miss the mark in an archery contest. Thus, it is to accumulate in our souls the crusts of enculturation, like barnacles on the bottom of the ships we sail through life. That crust includes greed, hate, racism, consumptive materialism, homophobia, wrath, and all the other kinds of things that get in the way of living a truly Godly life.

Thursday of this week, I turn on CNN just in time to hear the first reports of yet another shooting involving military installations down in Tennessee. Late that afternoon, I heard the name of the alleged shooter, who was killed in the aftermath of his own shooting spree in which four people were killed. As soon as I heard the name, Mohammod Youssef Abdulazeez, my first thought, God help me, was...."Oh, those Muslims again!" I know better than that! And I realized that the crust of enculturation still clings to me, too.

So, how do we get rid of that crust? How do we start living lives that make visible that God who lives within us? First, we

can take advice from the apostle Paul, wrote to the Christians at Phillipi and closed his letter by saying, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever wins respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovable, whatever is of good repute--if there is any virtue or anything deemed worthy of praise--cherish the thought of these things."

We can consciously look for the God in everyone else. My late dad used to tell me, "The Christ in me meets the Christ in you!" which essentially says the same thing

And we can pray. Not like many people seem to do it, as if they regard God as a cosmic gumball machine, or a divine Sears Roebuck catalogue. Place your order in, or put the penny in the slot, and wait for the sweet treat to roll into your hands.

Rather, our prayers can genuinely help us clear away this crust of enculturation, as we focus on looking for the God in others and helping those we can, just as we hope others, who are in the position to, can help us. We can pray for the strength and the inspiration to let the God In Here work through us to take care of the earth and all who dwell therein, in the words of the Psalmist.

Jesus taught us how to pray, and in the section of scripture we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer, he teaches us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread..." Notice that he does not say, "Give us this day our daily bread, with butter and sugar and grape jelly, or one of them Turkey Italianos, like they have at Subway. Help us as you give, O God, what we need, in other words, not necessarily what we want.

Finally, at the end of my time of ministry, things seem clearer. The burden I carried with me throughout my ministry has melted away.

I'll never forget the guy who came through the line at the end of one service. "I love the church so much," he said. "It's the people I can't stand!" I would say he sort of missed the point. As we come together in church, our duty to honor God is to show God's love to others as we worship and fellowship and learn together, and then to reach out to other bodies of faith, regardless of what they might call God.

The Christ in me meets the Christ in you.

The God in me meets the God in you.

AMEN