

GOD: THE CENTER OF VALUE
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University Congregational Church

Reading: Matthew 6:19-21

Don't acquire possessions here on earth, where moth or insect eats away and where robbers break in and steal. Instead, gather your nest egg in heaven, where neither moth nor insect eats away and where no robbers break in or steal. As you know, what you treasure is your heart's true measure.

I would venture to say that since the Enlightenment, and certainly in the past two centuries, Western society has understood faith in terms of beliefs. God is not a subject with whom we are in relationship. God is not a being with whom we communicate. Rather, God is an idea who requires constant definition. That is to say, God is an object that we have conversations about. Much of that conversation centers on the existence of God and proofs of God's existence. I think we are something like children who often say, "Oh, yeah? Prove it." And it seems that most of our lives we are trying to prove something to somebody else that justifies our own existence and the existence of God.

For example, many people edit hymns and creeds when they are asked to recite them. The Apostle's creed becomes something like:
"I believe in God the father almighty...heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus...who was conceived...who was born...of Mary, suffered under

Pontius Pilot; was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day...I believe in the ...church, ...communion, the forgiveness of sins... the body, and life...Amen.”

The truth is that we associate God with the ideas that we have about God. They are propositions that we think are true, though we can change our mind about them if someone else can convince us that such a change is demonstrably necessary.

We use beliefs not only to describe our God, but also to define our church or denomination. Our beliefs are our identity and they define us. We also use them to define someone else. By our beliefs we determine who are the people like us and in our theological camp and those who are not. Who is in and who is out? Who are the saved and who are the damned? I am reminded of the story of the man who was standing on the San Francisco Bridge contemplating suicide. A passerby stopped his car in the hope that he could save the man.

“Are you a Christian,” asked the driver?

“Yes I am,” replied the despondent man.

“Great. So am I,” said the driver. “What kind of Christian are you? Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant?”

The jumper said, “Protestant.”

“Great. Me too. What kind of Protestant are you? Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Pentecostal?”

“Pentecostal,” answered the jumper.

“So am I,” rejoined the driver. “Are you an initial evidence or a third wave Pentecostal?”

“Initial evidence,” said the jumper.

The driver got very excited. “Me too. What kind of initial evidence? Are you AOG, CRC, COC, CCC?”

The jumper said, “AOG.”

The driver could not believe the coincidence and thought it must be God’s will. “I’m Assemblies of God too. Are you Premillennial, Postmillennial, or Amillennial?”

The man on the bridge declared, “Amillennial.”

The driver became enraged and shouted, “Die you heretic scum!” and pushed him off the bridge.

I would like to propose that such an understanding of faith not only trivializes the meaning of God; it is also divisive of the human family. It diminishes the vitality of faith and makes us enemies of one another. We find ourselves hiding behind articles of religion. The ideology of religion becomes the bastion behind which are garrisoned. Our guard is ever up

and we must be ever defensive against creeping Presbyterianism, crawling Catholicism, or vermicular Methodism. Sadly, we never get to know the human beings whose faith we think we must vanquish. We sometimes never get to know the God behind our own ideology, the one who rests deep within our souls.

God must not be reduced to an idea or concept to be argued. There is no way in the name of God that we dare judge, condemn, punish, or kill another human being on the basis of human ideas about God. It does not matter how those ideas are formed, be they creeds, doctrines, cannon law, or episcopal letter. It does not matter where these ideas are declared, either in scripture or doctrine. We cannot confuse our words about God for God.

Yes, I do declare that ideas such as the conception of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, the virginity of Mary, miracles such as Jesus walking on water, or the physical resurrection of the body are not ultimately important. Frankly I do not think they are worth arguing about, splitting a church over, or quitting a church for. Likewise, ecclesiastical systems of power have no ultimate value be they connectional, congregational, or episcopal. Any religious idea or systems of ideas that cause us to hold other human beings in contempt violates the very nature of God,

regardless of the name that we give to God. Any religious idea or systems of ideas that cause us to hold other human beings in contempt violates the gospel of Jesus. As Christians we must challenge such ideas in the very name of God.

I am proposing that the obsession we have with the ideas about God are subject to corrosion, irrelevance, and conflict. They are easily broken into, stolen, and swapped for a cheap knockoff. I wonder if we might consider moving away from understanding God as theological proposition or creedal formula and think about God as the center of value. Now I realize that such possibility is immediately compromised by the fact that I must use words to approach this God. Words become phrases that we get consumed by and thereby miss the essential meaning we are striving for. For better and worse, words are necessary for communication and I hope that you might focus less on my words than the truth I am trying to point us to.

I am reminded of the Zen master who was pointing to the moon as he gave his students a lesson. Sadly they were looking at his hand rather than the moon.

The faith and the God I am referencing is not that of logic, reason, analysis, and empirical evidence. They are essential for critiquing,

challenging, and deepening our faith. They are essential tools to combat fear and superstition. There is a place for these and we cannot substitute them for the living God.

The faith and the God that I am intimating springs from the poetry of the heart and speaks to us in story, allegory, parable, song, poem, fine arts, sacred movement, and music. These swell the soul with holy being, purpose, and meaning. They point to a divine presence and passion about the value of human life and the quality of our relationships within it. Let me give an example.

Recall the story from the Old Testament of David and Bathsheba. David witnessed Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house. He was immediately obsessed with her and demanded that she visit the king's chambers. As a result of their interlude she became pregnant. David arranged for Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to return home from war, imagining that Uriah would exercise conjugal rights. But the good commander refused because his soldiers would not enjoy such privileges. David then sent Uriah back to battle and to the kind of fighting that would get him killed. And, indeed, Uriah was killed. David was guilty of covetousness, adultery, and murder.

The prophet, Nathan, confronted the king not with a theological treatise on the fall of man and the nature of sin. Nor does he press upon the conscience of David the ethical issues of the corporate abuses of power. Rather, Nathan told David a very simple story.

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flock and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie on his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.” (II Samuel 12: 1-4)

Now the Bible tells us, “David’s anger was greatly kindled against this man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.’”

Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’”

What has Nathan done in this story? He has not appealed to moral or legal law. David has already shown that such laws could be easily

dispensed with. Nathan does not cite scripture to David, like the Ten Commandments that prohibit adultery and murder. He appeals to something deeper in David's soul. He solicits an abiding sense of justice that David truly cherishes, despite his weaknesses and peccadilloes. Nathan petitions that universal goodness that is greater than testosterone. Without even mentioning the name of God or the word sin, Nathan invites David into those ultimate values that bring light to his own guilt.

Every one of us has a center of value. And the truth be told, regardless of religious or denominational identity, that center of value could be something other than God. For some people their center of value might be a political cause; for others it might be a fetish; for some it is their work; yet for others it is wealth.

How do you know what your center of value is? Jesus answered that by asking, "Where is your heart?" What do you cherish? What are you passionate about? Who or what do you trust? Your heart is what you treasure. When push comes to shove what you treasure is the center of your life.

The Christian faith claims that God is the center of our value. God is the life giving impetus to create and recreate. God is the wisdom to make moral decisions that serve the common good. God is the passion to

love others even when they are unlovely. God is the grace to forgive, over and over again, beyond all counting. God is the glory of a spring shower in the mountains of North Carolina, and the giggle of a nine-year-old girl. God is the comfort of one who sits through the night as a beloved one passes to eternity. God's black hands, and white hands, and brown hands reach across the borders of prejudice to claim the human family. God is the gentle old fellow who rides the teacups at Disney World for the seventh time with a grandchild too frightened to ride Thunder Mountain. God is the truth that sets us free. God is the center of value who is ultimately undefinable and indefensible.

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