

A Distorted Image

June 3, 2007

There are plenty of times when I feel like Becker in the clip we just saw. The more I hang around religion, the less I like it. It seems to me that over the centuries every form of religion has only created increased dissension and conflict. There have been times in history when acts of tyranny and brutality have been inflicted in the name of God. I even remember a time when I was doing my Clinical Pastoral Education work at La Rue Carter Hospital during seminary days when a psychiatrist there said that that hospital would be empty were it not for all the harm that had been inflicted by religion!

That's a pretty strong statement, but over the years, I have begun to understand a lot more what that person was trying to say. I'm afraid that all too often religion has tarnished God's image, and actually perverted our understandings of who God is and what God is like. And there are times that our perverted images are so pervasive that they are seen as truth. That's probably part of the reason so many people are turned off to faith. There is an upsurge in spirituality in our country, and around the world, but it's not frequently happening in our organized religious bodies.

I guess that's one of the reasons I like to think of myself as more spiritual than religious...because religion sometimes comes across as a dirty world. And I can see why. Why would we want to have anything to do with a religion that tells one of its so-called pastors to carry a profane sign saying, "God hates fags" at a funeral of one who has served in Iraq? Or why do we want to be part of a religion that believes God causes or sends one disaster or another to us to teach us a lesson or punish? "No thanks. I'm not getting myself into something like that!"

I may have shared this story with some of you in the past, but a number of years ago, a pastor friend and his wife were hiking in one of our state parks. They had stopped to rest for a while, and were sitting atop a rather large boulder. As they stood up to continue their hike, her leg had apparently gone to sleep, and before he could grab her, she fell some 30 feet to the ground below.

You can imagine his panic as he raced to her, and then as he ran to try to find help. When the paramedics finally got to her, she was dead. When one of those attending her learned that my friend was a pastor, the paramedic said to him, "You, of all people, should understand this is the will of God!" I'm sure the paramedic was trying to offer comfort, but I can tell you that my friend did not find those words comforting.

Why would anyone be drawn to a God who is depicted as one randomly inflicting pain and suffering and heartache on people? Why would any

person of sound mind choose to be a part of a mindset that professes to be so condemnatory and judgmental, and 100% right? I sure don't get it.

Sometimes I actually wonder if some of the religious spokespersons we hear in the media aren't actually projecting their own prejudices, hatred or insecurities onto God. They need God to justify their point of view, and actually come to believe that their viewpoint is God's viewpoint. I guess they're sincere, but I certainly can't understand how we can reconcile such behavior with the kind of life Jesus lived, or, for that matter, with the kind of life any of those the prophets of the various world religions lived and modeled. It seems to me that's just one of the ways in which God's image is distorted by one form or another of religion.

The same kind of thing is illustrated in one of the books I'm currently reading, *The Faith Club*. I haven't gotten very far in it yet, so I can't offer much about it. However, at the beginning, it's quite clear why the book has come into being. In the aftermath of 9/11, an American Muslim of Palestinian descent faced constant questions about Islam, God and death from her children, who happened to be the only Muslims in their classroom. This mother reached out to two other mothers, one Christian and the other Jewish, to try to understand and answer those questions for her children. In fact, their original goal was to write a children's book that would enhance understanding among the various faiths.

In the little bit that I have read, I've found some new information that has given me a more intimate, personal perspective on a religion that we often label as hate-filled and violent. For instance, although she does not attend a mosque, she always carries a Quran, the holy book of Islam, in her purse, and prays, but not necessarily the five times a day that the more traditional Muslims do. She is also reluctant to throw out leftover bread without kissing it and asking God's forgiveness. That's due to an Islamic custom that serves to remind them of the many people in the world who are hungry. That sounds very different to me than a hate-filled faith.

Along with the problem of religions acting in ways that don't always seem faithful, many of us also come to a conclusion as to what a religion is like based on the actions of a radical few. The truth is that every single world religion has those who are on the radical fringe, and who can and do give Judaism or Islam or Christianity or any other faith tradition a bad name. Coupled with our stereotypes, we all participate in distorting the image of God.

When we think about the three major world religions that I've just named, we probably need to realize that all three go back to Abraham as the ancestor of their faith, and thus share a common faith history. However, the problem starts, according to Bruce Feiler in his book *Abraham*, when we formalize and write down our version of the story. That's when the stories become rigid, and no

longer dynamic and fluid. They begin to highlight our differences rather than what we share in common.

In fact, Feiler puts it bluntly when he writes, **“Once Jewish commentators open the door by decoupling Abraham from his surroundings and recasting him in their image, Christian commentators come storming through, followed closely by Muslim commentators. If Abraham can become the First Jew, he can just as easily become the First Christian and the First Muslim. Soon the religions would be at war over their supposedly common heritage. And suddenly the carefully balanced message of the Abraham story—that God cares for all God’s children—a tradition that existed for hundreds of years before the religions themselves existed, was put in jeopardy by the inheritors of that tradition.”**

It seems to me that Feiler hit the nail on the head by naming the way our various religions have altered the message of God by adapting the stories of the faithful to fit their purposes. The central understanding of God was as a God of love and care for ALL God’s children. However, we’ve somehow gotten into “God loves us best,” or “God loves us, and doesn’t love you.” That’s saying our way is the only way to understand God. In my opinion, that process creates a very distorted image of who God is.

If God is not judgmental, if God doesn’t show preferential treatment to some, then what is God like? I’ve said time and time again that God is love. Because of my experiences of God, I know that we’re cared for unconditionally, and loved always. I’m convinced that God hurts when we hurt.

A few minutes ago I shared the story about my friend’s wife who fell to her death, and the words that the paramedic offered my friend to comfort him, but I didn’t tell you what my pastor friend said back to the man. After uttering some words that weren’t very religious at all, he told the paramedic, “No, that’s not it at all! This is not God’s will! When she fell, God’s tears were the first to fall!” My friend knew that God wants only good for us, and God’s heart is broken when such sadness and tragedy occur.

Furthermore, I believe God wants a close relationship with us, but won’t force it on us. In fact, God loves us enough to give us free will—the freedom to choose whether we’ll turn toward God or away. You see, a love that forced or coerced isn’t love at all; it’s a power play, and that isn’t what God wants. God wants us to freely choose to connect, not to be forced to.

We’re well aware of what can happen when we make the choice not to align ourselves with God, but instead choose to use our freedom to go a less positive route. We inflict pain and suffering on others and eventually on ourselves. God doesn’t want that, but doesn’t intervene. Instead, God waits patiently for us to turn around and come home

again, much like the Prodigal Child. And know, that when we turn homeward, God runs to embrace us and hold us close.

You know, my understanding of God is probably a distorted image, too, because none of us can know really the totality of what God is like. However, we have the examples of the ones we consider faithful who’ve come before us, those who have tried to help us understand how we can live more whole and fulfilled lives.

It all has to do with how we relate to one another, and to God. In our Christian tradition, we have the example of Jesus asking us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Love, not hate, is the way, and that comes from God.

You may have noted that our Bible passage today isn’t just our Bible passage. It consists of a few of the expressions of an almost universal understanding shared by the world’s great religions. We commonly refer to it as the Golden Rule, and I think it points us all to the heart of the matter, and toward that which we share in common. Let’s take a look.

Buddhism: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

Christianity: “Do for others just what you want them to do for you.” Luke 6:31 (TEV)

Hinduism: “This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you.”

If we truly followed these concepts, I can’t see how we’d be distorting the image of God. Rather, I think we’d be coming a lot closer to the essence of what God is like. That’s what I think. How about you?

Closing:

A Hindu prayer addresses all the ways in which you and I tend to distort who God is, and maybe it’s one that should be our constant prayer. It goes like this:

God, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations:

**You are everywhere, but I worship you here;
You are without form, but I worship you in these forms;**

You need no praise, yet I offer these prayers and salutations.

God, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations.

To that I say, “Amen.”

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.

Amen.