

“Tell Me All Your Thoughts on God” July 12, 2009

This message started on the 14th floor of a condo overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. A few weeks ago I was with Jenny’s family—her mom and dad...brother and sister and their families. On the 14th floor veranda of that condo with a warm Gulf breeze, a clear sky full of stars, and the sound of waves gently lapping up on the beach, it is easy feel close to God. I spent several evenings on that veranda soaking all that in...lots of thought...lots of deep breaths...lots of contemplation.

One evening though, after we’d put all 72 kids to bed...Jenny’s brother and sister have almost that many...we ate dinner together as a family. We had fresh, previously frozen shrimp...because someone didn’t have cash for the fresh, just caught shrimp...who carries cash anymore? Anyway, we were having a lovely dinner together with this setting I have described as our backdrop. As we were eating, I heard a lot of emergency vehicles passing with sirens wailing. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but about 15 minutes later I noticed a helicopter coming from the east, and seemingly descending pretty close to us.

I excused myself from the table to take a look. As it turned out, the sports complex across the street had been made into a medical evacuation area. From our vantage point high up, we could see the main drag for miles either way. So, I could see about a 1/2 mile down the road from where the evacuation point had been established on the field, an obvious crash scene just in front of an amusement park. There sat all those emergency rescue vehicles I heard earlier...torches had been set in the road to divert traffic...it was clear something pretty bad had happened. Finally, after what seemed forever, an ambulance came screaming down the road toward the evacuation area. The ambulance crew transferred their patient to the helicopter crew and the helicopter took off headed west towards Pensacola, which would have been the closest big city. Leaning against that rail with the warm breeze, clear, starlit sky and gentle waves...I watched that helicopter until I could not longer see its flashing lights. I just sat there for the longest time with a sick feeling in my gut knowing someone was going to get a phone call they didn’t want.

Later that evening I found myself on the veranda with Jenny’s brother and his wife, and Jenny’s sister’s husband. We were just kind of making small talk, and then the helicopter incident came up. All of us were speculating as to what we thought happened. Then, somehow, the conversation turned to “**Why does God let things like this happen?**”

That may seem like a logical question to you...but I need to preface it by saying this is not a normal conversation

for us. That is to say, in the 19 years Jenny and I have been married, our families have become pretty well-versed in conversation topics to avoid...mainly, politics and religion. Moreover though, we really don’t sit around and just talk much, period. So, that we were talking about...God, was, well...odd. So, this question gets put out there...“**Why does God let things like this happen.**” Jenny’s brother turned to me and said, “Well, you’re the expert...why?” I thought...oh boy, here we go.

*Well...in my professional opinion...*and they thought they were going to get an easy answer, NOT...What I really hear you asking—which is what I believe the *real* question behind the question is—**Who or what is God? What is the nature of God?**

Yeah, so you’re the expert...who or what is God? Fair enough, I’m the minister. I’ve been to seminary...I’ve baptized your children. Here is the thing though...who or what I think God is...*is*...who or what I think God is. How I experience God is my unique experience. Me trying to tell you how to experience God is like saying watch Tiger Woods on video and then go play golf like Tiger Woods. I thought that was a pretty good one...don’t you?

Well, the conversation went on...somehow we got on the topic of the Mormon faith and polygamy. Believe you me, I am no expert on the Mormon faith—I only know it by sketchy historical study, but I tried my best to explain. After being instructed by an angel, Joseph Smith found some golden plates and gathered a following...and that polygamy for which they are so well known was pretty much dropped in the 20th century except for some more fundamentalist fringe groups...Wait, wait wait...you mean some guy found a golden tablet, and they believe God sanctioned all that stuff? So, if God says all that stuff is okay, what does that say about all the crazy stuff Christians are supposed to believe? Is it all true? “Well, you’re the expert...Is it all true?”

Here is the thing...yes, I did got to seminary. I have written countless papers on the nature of God. The existence of evil. Divine Grace, and on and on. Just recently I had to write another paper for the ordination process. The question was: **How has the practice of ministry affected your experience and understanding of God?** How many pages would you imagine I wrote on that? Five? Ten? Thirty? Try...one...paragraph.

Now...many of you have heard me say this before. On our orientation day, the seminary President, Dr. Edward Wheeler, addressed all the incoming students. He said, “**Many of you will leave here in 3 or 4 years and you will believe radically different than you do now. Others of you will believe exactly the same, but at least you’ll know why.** That statement has always resonated with me because it has been my experience. Very little about what makes up my spiritual, theological journey is different now than it was then. In fact, when I take the “Belief O’Matic on <http://www.beliefnet.com> today, I get a very similar result that I did 8 years ago...maybe a little different order. Now...though, I simply have better

language to express my understanding of God and all that other stuff. I've run all my fundamental assumptions through the rigors of academic study. However, and here is the key point...what I value and what I believe...is still very personal and unique to me. Yes, I can help guide, facilitate, share, point...but *tell*...you? One of my professors of theology said, the day that you think you have it all figured out...the day you think you have the all answers...that's the day you need to find a new career. For each of us God is a journey...some of our paths will be similar, some different...but each person's experience and understanding of God is deeply personal.

Now don't get me wrong...I have very strong convictions. I studied very hard in seminary. I have the diploma with the extra, fancy gold sticker to prove it. But...who or what I think God is continues to evolve and grow for me everyday. My understanding and experience of God grows when I hear others share their experience and understanding of God.

I was recently having a conversation with a friend via facebook, we were talking about each other's work. I had commented about an experience I had in my most recent trip to Kenya. And she shared the following story with me...

In 2004, my friend went on a week-long mission trip to Honduras. She said they were kind of an odd group...one hippie, one minister, a chain-smoker, and her...but each of them wanted to make a difference, to do something different. It wasn't through my church, but I had read about this AIDS orphanage called Montana de Luz in the newspaper. The orphanage was started by a local minister and mission groups went to work there one week a month. Feeling like there was more in the world that she needed to do (ok, maybe my midlife crisis) She knew when she read the article that she wanted to go there some day. A few weeks later her husband had lunch with his friend Tom who told him about this great organization that his cousin ran called Montana de Luz. Tom wanted to put together a group to go down there. Her husband came home with a passport application and told her that she was going to Honduras with Tom and some of his friends. She said, "**It was one of the best experiences of my life. I was surrounded by poverty and love and truth and it was the closest I have ever felt to God.**" Don't really know what I'm trying to say...

Yes...I know exactly what she was trying to say. Back in 2004 when I went to Kenya for the *first* time...when I looked into the malnourished eyes of a baby dying from the complications of HIV/AIDS...I had the overwhelming experience that I was looking into the eyes of God and heard God say...what you did not do for the least of these you did not do for me.

And, more recently, we were on a family shopping trip to Marsh when our resident theologian, Harry, struck again. You guys know I've been on this bumper sticker kick. If you weren't here last week, we talked about bumper stickers, and I've been all over town taking pictures of people's bumper stickers. Well a couple of weeks ago I came to a screeching halt right there in the parking lot because I had spied another one, a doozie! This one said (**Godless American**). Believe me, I made a big deal of it...Annie said, what, what...what does that mean. I answered her by saying it simply means that the person who drives that care is an American who appears to be believe there is no God. WHAT! Harry said, how could they believe that?! God is everywhere and is in everything.

Look, there's God...pointing to a tree, and look there's God...pointing at a store, and look there's God...pointing at the sky, and look at me, God's in me...God's in you...in everybody. Every time I talk with that kid about spiritual matters I'm convinced I wasted a lot of time and money in seminary!

Our vision for The Garden **is that people experience God wherever they are**. That may seem like a simple enough statement, but it took 4-5 of us several weeks and many, many rewrites to get to it. In the end, we agreed on this one because it places no condition on how or where people might experience God. For me, as many of you know, my most profound experiences of God are through music. I am utterly convinced that the Holy Spirit works through the power of music. Of course, yes...U2, but The Foo Fighters...Coldplay...Hoobastank, while I'm mowing, at the gym, in my car...look, there is God. That's MY experience of God.

If you've been around The Garden for any length of time, you know that we are very intentional and careful about the "God language" we use. The reason is because more traditional, male-dominant God language has put God in a box...that you will only understand God as an all-powerful, dominant male. Not only has this language has been used to regrettably exclude many from the church, I truly believe this exclusive language limits our understanding of God.

With this in mind, a few weeks ago in the context of Father's Day Steve Roberts gave the prayer at Oak Hill. What I heard was not an exclusive understanding of God, rather Steve's evolving understanding of God...and maybe, God's understanding of us.

CLOSING:

Have a great Sunday, go in peace.

