“Tell Your Children”

22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Nov, 12, 2017, Year A

Psalm 78:1-7

First Congregational Church, UCC, Saugus, Massachusetts

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“Who’s God?” A small child, told that God loves him, asked this question. It’s a loaded question, one that adults sometimes stumble over when we hear it. Because we start out giving what we think is a very rational explanation.

“Who is God?” we say. “Well, God made the whole world.” See, we didn’t really answer the question. We replied with what God *does* instead of who God *is*.

Our answer throws the child off, too. “Everything?” they say. “Yes,” we say, “you, me, stars, frogs, grass, rain.” Now, comes their smile, that mix of both doubt and interest. “How about chicken pox?” they say. “Did God make that?” And, there we have it in a nutshell, the age-old question that has baffled all of us, from small children to learned theologians: If God loves us so much, why do bad things happen to us?

So, we can see the God-question can be very complicated, especially when we introduce the idea to someone who has no idea what we are talking about.

When I was a kid, we were expected to go to church with our parents. It was just a fact of life, like brushing our teeth after meals, or taking out the trash. It was expected of us and we never thought of questioning why. And we certainly never thought of questioning who God is.

But in the years since I was young, our society has been questioning all of our social, political, and religious traditions. We want to know why some citizens are treated more equally than others. We want to know why elected officials sometimes ignore the will of the people. We want to know why we should spend any time in houses of worship when we darn well know the people inside those walls are not as perfect as they would lead us to believe.

What we do want is truth. We want more for our kids than we had. We want this world to be perfect for them, knowing it will not be. We want them to believe in a loving, protective Presence they can call upon whenever they are in need. But how can we explain this to kids who can find the answer to any question by tapping on a phone? What comes up when we Google, “Who is God?”

Well, I did that this week and came upon a *You Tube* video of kids sitting down with an artist and trying to describe to him what God looks like. The artist would then incorporate their ideas into a sketch of God.

The artist started out asking, “Who is God?” One kid said, “A guy in the clouds, kind of like the Simpsons.” Another said God was invisible. Another said God had a frog body and a lion’s head. Another said God is a spirit, so he has no clothes. The artist asked a small boy and girl, “Could God possibly be a woman?” The girl screamed, “NO!” The boy was more pragmatic. “It *could* be possible,” he said.

So, the question of “Who is God?” quickly devolves into an easier concept for kids, “What does God look like?” This makes me wonder if we should first start with a more relatable analogy like, “Who is your grandfather (or grandmother)?” Maybe the child would say, “Dad’s father, or Mom’s mother.” There’s a pretty good opening. “Well,” we could say, “God is the Parent of everyone in the world.” Then we could segue into, “What do a mother and father do for their kids?” (protect them, shelter them, keep them warm and fed) and then hope the conversation turns to talking about love.

For me, God *is* Love. I mean the *feeling* of love. The *emotion* we feel when we love someone or something. The heart-warming ache when we do something unselfishly for another. The lovely release when we say we’re sorry or we accept the apology of our enemy. Sacrificing our time, sweat, and tears for the betterment of our community. Sitting in comforting silence, holding the hand of one who is grieving. Showing up when we really don’t want to but, when all is said and done, feeling satisfied we did the right thing. When we feel that strong and moving feeling within our hearts, that, to me, is God.

Perhaps showing kids who God *is*, rather than telling them, is more important. Showing who God is starts with us. Do we personify a Godly attitude in the world? Do we honor other human beings that God breathed life into as much as we honor ourselves? Do we show kindness, compassion, and generosity to people? Do we honor the Earth as God’s fragile creation and practice conservation and preservation? Most importantly, do we tell our children that all living things – people, animals, plants, air, and water – are precious to God and to us?

Kids’ drawings tell us a lot about how they view the world. Their concept of God might be one of power, like super-hero strength or magical abilities. Kids’ pictures of their homes often show family members drawn as large as the house itself. We think maybe it’s because they haven’t been taught the concept of scale, but maybe it’s more about the importance they grant to the inhabitants of the home in comparison to the house itself. We adults loom as large to kids as the structures they live in, where they are fed, cared for, and loved.

That’s a pretty good description of God’s household. God’s love encompasses all of us and God’s house is big enough for us all. God’s love is as big as the whole universe and beyond. God’s love is as intimate as a baby’s smile. God’s love is big enough to heal the world – *if* we invite it in. God’s love is as infinitesimal as that tiny shift in our stony hearts when we recognize we may have done somebody wrong. And God loves every one of us, warts and all, equally, fiercely, and unconditionally.

Our country seems deeply divided right now. Maybe it always has been, but our separate ideologies seem much more pronounced. What was hidden and underground has come to full flower in the public sphere. How are we handling the daily headlines of wrong-doing and violence? How much do our kids hear about the adult misbehaviors in the world? And how much do they wonder if this is OK to act like that or not?

The psalm that we read this, morning is very ancient. It was composed around 700 BCE; that’s pretty old. But people were thinking about the very same things back then that we think about today. They faced times of war and tumult. They were attacked by enemies; they fought amongst themselves; they wanted to provide for their children as their parents had provided for them. When bad things happened to them, they questioned if their God was still present among them.

So, we see, there is nothing new under the sun. Human beings have been at peace and at war with each other since the beginning of recorded time. How much of this history should we teach our children? How honest shall we be when the time comes that they ask us what is the right thing to do when confronted with a hard choice?

The easiest way to teach our children the right and moral thing to do is be living examples. I know this puts a lot of pressure on us parents, as if we don’t have enough already. Raising kids is hard. But the reality is they are watching us all the time for clues as to how they should live in this world. They are watching to see how peaceful we are; what upsets us and makes us angry; who we are nice to and who we exclude. They are watching as we say one thing and do another.

But this is our charge. This is our call as parents, grandparents, and all adults in a child’s world. As the psalmist so honestly and eloquently puts it:

**1**My people, hear my teaching;  
    listen to the words of my mouth.  
**2**I will open my mouth with a parable;  
    I will utter hidden things, things from of old—  
**3**things we have heard and known,  
    things our ancestors have told us.  
**4**We will not hide them from their descendants;  
    we will tell the next generation  
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,  
    his power, and the wonders he has done.  
**5**He decreed statutes for Jacob  
    and established the law in Israel,  
which he commanded our ancestors  
    to teach their children,  
**6**so the next generation would know them,  
    even the children yet to be born,  
    and they in turn would tell their children.  
**7**Then they would put their trust in God  
    and would not forget his deeds  
    but would keep his commands.

So tell our children who God is, what God has done for us, what God is doing for us, and what God will do for us, for our whole lives. And tell our children the most important word in the English language is Love. And God is Love. Thanks be to our God. Amen.

References

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