

Speaking Rightly of God

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday
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Job 42:1-9; Hebrews 7:18-25; Mark 10:46-52

Text: "After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: 'My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.'" -- Job 42:7

What do you think it might mean to speak rightly of God? Use a lot of fancy theological jargon? Quote vast swaths of the Bible? Get tangled up in a bunch of "thee's" and "thou's" and "thy's" and "thine's" -- what one of my professors liked to call "Biblisich"?

Or might speaking rightly of God be as simple as this: "All right, then, I'll go to hell." That's what Huck Finn said to and about himself when he decided not to do the right thing and return a runaway slave to his owner. Huck had been told all his life that aiding a runaway slave was wrong. It was a form of theft, of stealing someone else's property, and people who stole other people's property went to hell. Thou shalt not steal. Everybody knew that, and Huck was stealing Jim from the widow Watkins, a poor ol' widow woman who, as Twain has Huck say, "hadn't ever done me no harm."

For three hundred and fifty years, most people in this country thought as Huckleberry Finn thought, that slaveholders didn't do anybody any harm by owning slaves, and Huck's change of heart came about not from long theological discussions in the Sunday School he could've attended and felt he should've attended but didn't attend, and where he would've learned that aiding a runaway slave was a sin deserving everlasting damnation, but rather from floating down the Mississippi River on a raft with a runaway slave. Of getting to know Jim as a human being rather than as a piece of someone else's property. Of coming to see how much of their experience of life overlapped, how much they had in common. Of coming to sense, at a level deeper than the stamp of his background and upbringing, that returning his friend to slavery would be a greater wrong than theft. "All right, then, I'll go to hell."

Sometimes, like Huck Finn, you have to risk everything -- all your security, all your comfort, all your friends, even all your certainty about what's right and wrong -- to speak rightly of God. Huck was ready to go to hell if that was the price he had to pay to break with everything he knew and loved in the face of new knowledge and a greater love. That's what it means to speak rightly of God.

Job found himself in a similar predicament in the book that bears his name, and he made the difficult decision to speak rightly of God from his own sometimes painful and bewildering experience of the divine rather than from the received theological tradition represented by his three friends.

Job knows unfairness when he experiences it, and he experienced it in his life in spades. Job never claimed to be perfect, but whatever he may have done in his life that was wrong, he didn't deserve what happened to him in his story and he knew it and he said it. He didn't deserve the loss of his home, his children, and his health. Job is angry

in his story, he rails at God, he shakes his fist at God, he gives God an earful. Job is anything but patient.

And when God uses a whirlwind to confront Job with the vastness and mystery of the universe, Job says that he might not have known everything there was to know about the cosmos – who, after all, was there when God invented the hippopotamus? -- but Job never says he didn't have a right to give voice to his suffering, his anger, his sense of outrage at what Abraham Heschel has called “the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness.”

And that's when God says to Job's three friends that they, unlike Job, have not spoken rightly of God. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, who sought to comfort Job with conventional religion, didn't speak rightly of God. Job spoke what it was right to say. Job spoke the truth. Job saw reality for what it was and he didn't try to salvage God's honor by saying that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. All was not right with Job's world, the world as Job knew it, and he said as much. And if the theology of his friends didn't fit Job's reality, theology would have to yield.

That's what speaking rightly of God means. It means speaking the truth about God and the world, as best you can see it, even when that truth flies in the face of received wisdom and established theology.

Today, in our tradition, is Reformation-Reconciliation Sunday, when we commemorate a man who stood apart from his church when it had fallen into corruption and lost its way. Martin Luther risked his career, his reputation, and even his life to call the church to reform, to recover its evangelical mission, and to break free of its chains of self-serving institutionalism. We remember Luther and those who sought to reform the church with him, and we continue that work today, not only by reforming our own United Church of Christ, but also by reaching out to all our sisters and brothers in Christ to heal the wounds of our estrangement.

Speaking rightly of God means not going along to get along. It means standing up for what's right when everyone else is sitting timidly by. It means not saying everything is okay when everything is clearly not okay. It means not letting fear have the last word. It means calling injustice injustice no matter who perpetuates it or who benefits from it, including us. It means standing apart from the crowd – including, if necessary, your family and friends – in order to say this is wrong and I can't go along with it.

And most difficult of all, speaking rightly of God means listening to God's still-speaking voice in such a way that we can hear the new things that God is saying to us. Before we speak, we have to listen, and only those who keep their hearts and minds and spirits open and attentive to the voice from the whirlwind will be able to speak rightly of God.

It appears that we as a people are losing our ability to listen – to God, to history, to nature, or to one another. Our political assemblies are degenerating into shouting matches, and even a member of Congress calls the president a liar as the president tries to speak.

There will be no right speaking of God from demagogues, fear mongers, and malcontents. No one speaks rightly of God when they distort the views and defame the character of those who disagree with them. None of us speaks rightly of God when we voice our fear and frustration in such hateful and violent language as “Death to Obama” and “Death to Michelle and her two stupid kids.” Imagine what it would be like if those were your children that sign was referring to.

Edmund Burke, the eighteenth-century English statesman, said that the only way for evil to win in the world is for enough good people to do nothing. I urge you, my friends, not to stand idly by, wringing our hands and essentially doing nothing, while our economy falters, our leaders fumble, and our political process is twisted by the corrupt, the frightened, and the self-serving.

We celebrated yesterday the life of a man who spoke rightly of God when he stepped up, forty years ago, to try to restore some integrity and honor to the leadership

of Richmond Heights. His surname notwithstanding, Dick St. John wasn't a saint, but he was a man of uncommon valor and integrity, and he brought those gifts to his service of this community, and Richmond Heights is a better place for it.

The book of Philippians tells us to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, and none of us can do that simply by going along with the crowd, even the church-going crowd. Like Job, each of us must struggle to find out God's truth for ourselves. Like Jacob, each of us must wrestle with God to emerge wounded by blessed by the encounter. And like Jesus, each of us may find ourselves facing our own Calvary, but resurrection, for each and every one of us, is the promise that awaits.

It takes courage to speak rightly of God. It takes independence and energy, and above all, it takes a commitment to making the faith of our ancestors our own. No one can do it for us, and the world is waiting. How much longer must it wait for you?