

Too Small a God

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The Third Sunday after Pentecost
The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 13, 2010

1 Kings 8:22-24, 27-30; Galatians 2:15-20; Luke 7:36-47

“But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” -- 1 Kings 8:27

I suspect I'm not the only person in the room who can point to a book or a class or a conversation or a teacher or an event that we could call life-changing. For me, one of those life-changing experiences was reading a very small book entitled *Your God Is Too Small* by a man named J. B. Phillips. I don't remember how the book came into my hands or who recommended it to me, but I do know that it changed my life. It changed me intellectually, religiously, spiritually, and even professionally. In fact, I doubt very seriously if I'd be standing in this place at this hour in this capacity with all of you this morning if J. B. Phillips hadn't written what he wrote.

What he wrote, simply, is this. Many of us adults worship – or try to worship – a God fit for children. And it doesn't work, any more than it would work for us to wear the clothing we wore as children. While we've grown up in other ways – physically, intellectually, and emotionally – many of us haven't grown up spiritually, and we still think of God as we first learned of God in Sunday School, and that's a disaster.

It's a disaster for a couple of very important reasons. The first is that a God fit for children can't do much by way of helping adults navigate the complex realities of the adult world. If we don't develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of God as we experience more and more of the world's complexities, our God simply won't be able to keep up, and we'll increasingly leave God behind.

That's why many people, I think, drop out of organized religion. It's fine for children, but in the real world of adults, it just doesn't work.

It doesn't work to talk of gentle Jesus, meek and mild, when you've got terrorists, criminals, and corrupt politicians to cope with.

It doesn't work to talk of a loving God who will take care of us when inexplicable suffering confronts us on a regular basis.

It doesn't work to talk of all things working together for good when so much of what happens seems to be random and not good at all.

The things we learned of God as children, and how we learned them, don't hold up well if we keep them locked away in some part of our selves and bring them out only in the safe environment of church on Sunday morning. Yes, God will certainly work there, but that's not what God is for.

The other serious problem Phillips identifies from having too small a god is the credibility of our witness as Christians. Whether we like it or not, Christians are made, they're not born, and they are made because they make a conscious decision to follow a way of life that does not come naturally to anyone. None of us is born with the desire to deny one's self, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus along a lifelong path of sacrificial love. That is not nature's way. It's God's way, we believe, and it's Jesus' way, and it's the Christian way (in theory, at least), but it most definitely is not the way we would behave

left purely to our natural instincts.

And so this way of life, this Christian path, has to be taught – rather, it has to be caught, from one person to another – and the only credible way we can do this, according to Phillips, is if our notion of God is big enough to take account of all the experiences of real, adult living – the questions, the doubts, the discoveries, the fears, the setbacks, the humiliations and the sometimes dreadful things that we do to one another and suffer at the hands of others.

So those are two of the big problems of having too small a god. Our own religious sensibilities eventually wither up under the onslaught of tough living, on the one hand, and our credibility as witnesses for the gospel of Jesus Christ is ineffectual in the real-world arena of competing ideas and loyalties.

So Phillips says we have to grow up, and our God has to grow up with us. We spend most of our lives as grown-ups, and that's the testing ground for our faith. Our religion will succeed or fail to the extent that it continues to grow and change with us as we go through life, and that's the basic idea behind the “God is still speaking” slogan in the United Church of Christ.

We don't believe in a static deity in the UCC. We don't believe in the old guy with a long white beard sitting in his nightshirt on a throne way up there somewhere. We know that you can find that imagery in the Bible – you can find it in religious texts that preceded the Bible, in fact – and you can find it all through our culture, but we know that our God is much bigger than that.

We know that such imagery is one way of our speaking of God, but we know that the important thing is listening for God speaking to us – speaking to us, perhaps, as an old man on a throne, or perhaps as a nurturing mother holding us close, or perhaps as a joyful companion sharing our adventures, or perhaps as a numinous presence that transforms the mundane into the extraordinary.

I don't think most of us in this denomination suffer from believing in too small a God. In most cases, I suspect, we have the opposite problem: our God doesn't have enough definition to be of much good to anyone, including us. Many of us who've made our way to the United Church of Christ have left religious traditions that had such a small God, we react with such explosive force for liberation that we blow everything to kingdom come and wind up with just bits and pieces that we try to put together like a jigsaw into something workable, but the effort is often hesitant and uncertain.

I want to suggest to you this morning that there is a vast treasure trove of resources awaiting you in the Bible, in the tradition of the Christian church, and in your own experience that can help you – help you deal with suffering and pain, help you deal with life's most baffling questions, help you deal with the twin riddles of life and death and life beyond death.

I want to suggest to you this morning – no, declare to you in no uncertain terms – that the God of Jesus Christ, the God of the Christian faith, the God whom we say we worship is not too small a God. Not too small for you, for your friends, for your neighbors, for anyone. I don't believe in too small a God. I didn't go into this profession because I believe in a tiny, deficient, always-coming-up-short God.

I became a Christian and a preacher of the gospel because I believe in a God of vast dimensions – a God to whom the word dimensions doesn't even apply. I believe in a God who is greater than the realities of life and death, whether they be joyful or painful. I believe in a God whose love reaches me in every moment of my existence, and whose love reaches far beyond me into worlds I can't even begin to imagine.

And because I have seen that great and wonderful God in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I am a Christian. My Christian faith doesn't limit

my experience of God – that's where I differ from my more conservative sisters and brothers – but rather it opens me up to that God. It provides me a window, a doorway through which I may step and come into the presence of that unimaginably vast and glorious God.

That, my friends, is my prayer for you. That you may grow more and more into the likeness and image of God that was and is in Jesus Christ, and thereby becoming, as the book of James urges us to be, “mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” May that be our prayer. In Jesus' name. Amen.