

The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

RCL Lectionary, Year A, Proper 19

September 14th, 2008

***Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California***

Letting God Go

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

As we looked at today's readings in Bible Dialogue this week, one of our members wondered about the reading from Genesis, and what it meant that we worship a God who leaves carnage washed up on the shores of the edge of the Red Sea. Is this the God we want? A tribal God who speaks -- more like the primitive deities of our ancestors -- out of smoke and fire; a harsh and judgmental God who smites those who oppose him, and brings wrath down upon the enemies of his people? We could remember, I suppose, the brutality the Egyptians had shown the ancient Israelites that leads up to our story today -- but that still doesn't fully answer the question. Is this very earnest and incredibly serious warrior God the same God that Jesus points to and, as we say, comes among us as the Christ?

When I was a freshman at Bradley University, I attended a weekly Bible Study sponsored by the local Campus Crusade movement. It was a way station for me to talk Christian story with others in the midst of a mixed-up and sometimes overtly anti-Christian academic environment. Kirby was our Bible Study leader, a sophomore -- a nice, soft-spoken guy who led us through the prepared lessons. He and I were a lot of like -- terribly earnest, eager to please God, lacking some development in the sense-of-humor area.

One evening the question arose in our little evangelical circle about why we knocked on doors to talk about the Gospel and refused to put down our Scriptures in the face of occasional academic hostility. Kirby paused for a moment as though he were having a hard time saying what he had been taught to say, and I'm not sure he really believed it when it came out of his mouth: "We proclaim the Gospel. . ." he said, "because we don't want people to go to Hell." I was too young, naïve, and humorless to ask him, "So how's that working for you?" I knew it wasn't working for me. Surely Jesus didn't mean us to judge those outside our circle so harshly. And what did Kirby's response say about God? But then again, fear can be a powerful motivator. Thing was, part of me wanted very much to agree with the certainty of his assertion, and the feeling of power that came with it.

It's easy to be hard on Kirby, and indeed a little smug. I'm tempted to score points this morning about the distorted theology we might want to call "fundamentalist" or "evangelical," two of our more favored punch-bags in the traditions of the Catholic church family. But we are just as chastened by today's readings as Kirby might be when it comes to the earnest and arrogant presumption of judgment about the depth of one another's faith, and even more so about who God is.

Kirby was caught in the teeth of a theology he had inherited -- not one that he had invented for himself. He was an otherwise perfectly decent guy, who avoided all the self-destructive pitfalls of university life, kept to his studies, nurtured some friendships, and partook of the grace of regular community around God. How could I judge him? Believing I was on the right side of God at age 18 provided a great deal of comfort in a world that turned out to be far harsher and more bewildering than I had ever imagined as I was growing up. My heart had just been broken by the first great love of my life. Many of the guys on my floor were drinking and carousing on a weekly, if not nightly basis, keeping me and my roommate up at all hours. I was practicing piano very seriously many hours of the day, and I was, above all else, an emerging adult with barely a glimpse of my own identity and even less knowledge about my true future.

Kirby and I and everyone else in that small Bible study group were doing the best we could with what we had. I would like to believe now that he has learned, as I am learning after 16 years, not to be so quick to condemn those I cannot completely understand, to box up God in a concept that creates safety for me; learning to forgive the ways so much of the human family continues to act out of fear, to laugh well and often -- to recognize that, without the laughter of the Spirit, so many of us find ourselves trapped at the edge of the Red Sea like the ancient Israelites, hemmed in by a pursuing army of terrible judgments and crushing anxieties, a merciless march of disappointments and brokenness, or, for many of our sisters and brothers today, real powers and principalities wanting to reclaim us as slaves.

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There is, at least for me, a profound wisdom tucked away even in the hardest of Jesus' words in today's Gospel: A reminder, a warning even, that when we decide to play God, we are bound to get a God who behaves very much like we do. If we hold ourselves up as God over our sisters and brothers in judgment or withhold the grace of forgiveness, we will stare into a mirror of our own hubris, and receive the same harsh judgment that we administer. If we are judgmental, we see God that way. If we lack forgiveness, our God holds grudges. If we wrap up our identity in a group of insiders vs. outsiders, then God becomes to us vengeful, ready to smite those outside our circle and then turning around to test our loyalty. Our challenge is to let God go and be God, just as we let our sisters and brothers and ourselves go from the bondage of our own expectations about the way things should be.

For me, this is a powerful teaching, a challenging one for all of us who have a string of judgments and sometimes even grudges we too often like to quietly nurture. Jesus is not trying to tamp down the strains of judgment, division, and chips on our shoulders just to preserve some peace in community. Nor is Paul, as he explores similar themes in his Letter to the Romans. Much more than that, Christ wants us and our shared life to be free from the poisonous presumption of playing God – a presumption that is as old as the human family is old, and one that undergirds some of the most earnestly bloody and brutal days of our shared and personal history.

Peter, also an earnest kind of guy, asks Jesus today if he should set aside such play at being God seven times. He wants to get it right, after all. . .forgive just the right amount – not too much, and not too little. Jesus tells him no, he should forgive seventy-seven times. It's a first-century way of saying, of course, that Peter should forgive without ceasing. Practicing forgiveness is a life-long endeavor and a spiritual discipline that comes very close to the heart of what we call being Christian. Setting aside our claims to inflict divine judgment upon one another is found in nothing less than the practice of our regular approach to God's table, of taking Christ into ourselves, of remembering that we are not God, and of course, nurturing and keeping a sense of humor about ourselves and one another. Taking ourselves and others more lightly is about setting aside the misapprehension that we carry the weight of the universe on our shoulders, or at least the responsibility of keeping others out of Hell. That's God's work. Like a poster that hung on a friend's wall in my undergraduate days said: "Please do not feel personally, totally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That's my job. Love, God." You know what? That works much better for me. How about you?

This is the Gospel we nurture in ourselves and then carry into the greater world. It's the Good News we have received that we are called to carry not only within but beyond these walls. . .and carry it into a world that too often condemns itself, caught as it is so often in the throes of earnest judgments and resentments that give rise to warfare and sufferings from the neighborhood to the nation.

My sisters and brothers, we have been offered a new life through God in Christ – an emptying of all our false claims of power and self-righteousness over others and even ourselves. An emptying so that we can be empowered by the love and compassion that flows from depth of all Being, that same lively mirth that knit the universe together and called it good, that nurtured the Israelites in the wilderness even as they complained bitterly about their lot; God as Lady Wisdom who patiently sets a lavish table in our midst and invites us to partake of the solid food of self-knowledge, compassion, and a truer understanding of others; the love that moved the hearts of the prophets to boldly proclaim the truth that heals even when it wasn't marketable, powerful, or popular; the love that led Christ to Jerusalem and even into the arms of a miserable, humorless death – because the Gospel was worth his life, and God in Christ would, of course, have the last laugh in the resurrection. . .

A Gospel that parts the sea for us when the armies of all that is wrathful and terrible comes to re-claim our hearts and lives. A Gospel that reminds us to laugh and let go of our earnest desire to be right; that releases us from the presumption of playing God. . . so that God may be free to be God. . . and we may be free to be the beautiful creatures and Creation God made us to be.

Amen.