

“Progressive Christianity – The God of Love”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

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All the way back to the days of my childhood I played games or had discussions that began with the words “what if”.

When I was about 10 and playing basketball in the alley I remember friends saying things like – “what if you could jump as high as Lew Al Cider?” And the response would be – “that would be so cool, nobody in the whole city could beat you at one-on-one.”

When I was about 13 I remember the guys saying something like “what if Mary liked you, what would you do?” and the responses would be – “I would be flying and at her house every night.”

When I was 17 someone would ask “what if your parents said you could take the car on a road trip anywhere you wanted, where would you go?” Or in English class, after reading “Lord of the Flies” the teacher would ask – “if you were setting up a society from scratch, what would you include?”

I’ve always liked the “what if” games and discussions. They frequently made me laugh and think and stretch beyond my immediate situation. Both the questions and the answers revealed our dreams, concerns, hopes and understandings. They helped me discover what was most important to me.

There is much about what is being called “Progressive Christianity” that tries to get at what is central to our Christian faith. There is much in our faith journeys that is guided by the “what if” questions we ask, some forms of Christianity believe this kind of questioning to be destructive to the church and even God. Many parts of the Christian community believe that asking questions about why life is as it is, only leads to a “wishy-washy” faith, where things like the Ten Commandments become ten suggestions.

But our church and its processor bodies before it, leading back to Jesus, Abraham and Sarah, and Adam and Eve, have always embraced the asking of questions and challenging the way things are, in the hope of greater life grounded in God’s ways.

Delwin Brown, who before his death was one of the leading voices for the Progressive Christianity movement writes: “For Christians, an unreflective faith is

not possible if we take seriously the injunction, (Jesus' 1st commandment) to love God with all our mind as well as heart and soul."

A reflective faith consists of examining ones faith through prayer, discussion, questioning, etc. We are not loving God if we are not using our minds, hearts and souls to examine what we believe and say about life and God.

The Pilgrims left England and sailed to North America in part because they wanted the freedom to examine their faith. The Congregationalists set up colleges across the country because they wanted people to grow in understanding as well as devotion and service. The United Church of Christ and its predecessor denominations have never ceased to believe that the teachings of the faith must speak to the struggles of our world and each person because that is what Jesus did. If what we say about God and the church only adds to people's pain and burdens in life, then it is up to those of us who embrace Jesus' first commandment to question what is being said.

When I was in college the struggle against apartheid in South Africa was in full swing. The world knew that it was unjust for the majority population of the country to be denied the right to vote, to be elected, to own property, and to be treated as fully human. The white government of South Africa claimed to be benevolent toward the black African people, but only if they stayed in their place. The churches of South Africa were making the claim that God had ordained that white people of South Africa were to run and control the country and any opposition was not just opposition to the government, it was also opposition to God.

Alan Boesak, an African Christian minister wrote a book called "A Farewell to Innocence". In the book he denounces the white churches claim that God had ordained their system of oppression of black people and proclaimed that God is a God of justice for all people. Rev. Boesak questioned the teachings of the church that said: "if God is all powerful and in control of everything, then all people are to accept their place in life as it is because this is what God wants." Rev. Boesak called this teaching a lie and wrote that what God really desires is to work through people to bring about change and justice.

The title of Boesak's book has remained with me since I first read it. I believe that his "farewell to innocence" is the endeavor that Progressive Christianity dares to pursue. For a long time a portion of the Christian community has spoken of God as some kind of cosmic monarch, a powerful benevolent authority who reigns on high. Modeled on the Roman Empire and other forms of top down governments

who win battles and impose social order that people hope will keep them safe, parts of the Christian community has decided that this is what God is like. But Christians have done this in great contradiction to the gospel witness.

Consider our familiar parable of the loving father in Luke's gospel. Notice I didn't call the parable "The Prodigal Son," and I didn't because the parable is really about the father who we are to understand is a reflection of God's nature.

The person that upsets us most in the story is not the wayward son, or even the diligent son – the person that upsets us most is the father.

There are at least two things that wrinkle us about the father: first, why does he give his young son his inheritance when he seems to know that the son will not use it wisely; and second, why does he open his arms with no reservation when his son returns empty handed? Those of us who try to be hardworking and dependable like the older son see the father's actions as irresponsible, leading only to an unproductive and chaotic future.

If the father is a reflection of an all powerful, all knowing, omnipotent monarch on high, the actions of this father/God are irresponsible and the only way for us to gain anything from the story is for us to say we cannot comprehend God's ways.

But if we hear in the story that God is not all powerful and that the way God is involved in the world is to inspire, forgive, love and work through people then we can find much more vital things to say about our relationship to God. God doesn't predetermine all outcomes; God supports us when we go boldly in to the world; God is more interested in our spirit and substance than the accumulation of wealth; God is more willing to celebrate our return than to punish us for our failings. But we cannot embrace these understandings of God if we don't let go of the image of God as an all powerful, benevolent monarch.

Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it this way "We must choose between a loving and present God, and an all powerful distant God. I choose the loving present God."

Throughout scripture, God and humankind's relationship with God is portrayed in a variety of ways. Sometimes God is punitive and angry and floods the world; sometimes God is the liberator who sends Moses and plagues to free the captives; sometimes God provides a future vision of streets paved with gold and streams of sparkling water. God, in the history of our faith, seems to say and provide what is needed at that particular time in order to reveal his love of

creation. I believe that God desires the fullness of heaven on earth and requires our participation in bringing it about.

The areas of our Christian faith emphasized by those involved in the Progressive Christian movement, I believe, are what are most needed by the church today in North America. As people with a great deal of power and wealth around the world we need to be self-reflective and critical. Just as the white South Africans made the claim that the world is as it is because God ordained it to be so, we in the U.S. could make similar claims, but they would be, and are wrong.

The sign on the south side of our building proclaims that “God is still speaking.” On both personal and communal levels it is part of our spiritual journey to listen for what God is saying to us now, where we live. We are not to be telling God who we want God to be, we are to be listening for who and what God needs us to be. As cultures, societies, nations, religious tradition and diverse lifestyles encounter each other more and more, Progressive Christianity calls us to listen with greater attentiveness to what God is saying about how the peoples of the world live together.

As our planet is taxed by the global population, we need to listen with greater attentiveness for what God is saying about being stewards of creation. If God proclaims in Jesus the Christ that God’s reign is here in earth as well as into eternity, then the care of the earth and its inhabitants are our concern.

In a culture that is deeply committed to individual liberties we need to listen for what God is saying to us about our dependence on others, about loneliness and community, about judgment and forgiveness, about generosity and personal security. In a world that connects so much through organized activities, how do we lift up the gifts of connecting spiritually and personally.

These are some of the questions and concerns that the Progressive Christian movement calls people of faith to address. While they may seem new or even forced, they are actually as old as our faith and they are certainly consistent with how our particular Christian tradition has honored eternal truths while living in the world today. What we say about who God is and what God is like, forms and shapes who and what we think we should be like. Let us be deliberate about who we say God is that God’s ways might flourish in our lives and the world.