

Problem: Sometimes I want God to be MY God only, not THEIR God.

- How many of you remember either in your own childhood or in the raising of one of your own children the often difficult task of learning how to share? I remember as a kid I had a prized set of matchbox cars and trucks which somehow got into the “communal basket” of matchbox vehicles. One day I discovered that my younger brother was playing with them and I confidently interrupted his play, took what was “rightfully mine”, and bopped him on the head with one. Needless to say, this did not go over well with my parents who sat me down and gave me news that was very hard to hear: your toys can also be Kevin’s toys.

-It’s interesting to me how we make such a big deal of teaching children generosity and sharing: just go on the internet and google “teaching kids to share” and you will get a plethora of expert advice in how to make kids see the benefit of letting someone else play with their prized possessions. Yet, I’m not sure we have completely mastered sharing even as adults. Our world is very much divided into “what’s mine is not yours.”

-Just take our emphasis on money and investments. Many studies have found that most money made by billionaires in this country is not made through working or sharing of skills. It’s by keeping the money in investments which generates more money. Keeping it to themselves pays off.

-Or take the rise in private land ownership within our state. Private land ownership, now according to the Montana Fish and Wildlife, has risen to almost 65% of the state. The number of fences, gates, and boundaries being erected to separate what is private from public and keep most people out is at an all-time high. This despite the fact that a lot of this land historically was at one time open to hunters, fishers, and lovers of the outdoors. Perhaps the line in the Woody Guthrie song needs to be rewritten: “This Land is MY Land (full stop). Not YOUR Land.”

-Our journey with our fearless prophet Jonah is about to come to an end. But not without an important question, a question that relates to sharing: “What if God is not meant to be just OUR God (with all the privileges that come with it), but also THEIR God too?” What does it mean to have to share the divine?

Solution: God’s character challenges us to rethink our idea of justice as well as ownership.

-In Jonah’s world, this was problematic: “For I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and ready to relent from punishing.” For Jonah, God is TOO gracious and merciful. It sounds silly, but is it the truth?

-Nineveh was Jonah’s and his people’s mortal enemy. They were the capital of the Assyrian Empire, an empire known for invading towns, cities, and foreign nations in very intimidating and barbaric ways. Rape, murder, torture, forced slavery: they were all present when the Assyrian army showed up. Jonah’s challenge in “sharing God” boils

down to the fact of breaking down his rules of justice. In Jonah's world, $A+B=C$ (Assyrian army conquered Israel and killed many people + they worship foreign gods and idols = punishment and judgement from the God of Israel) Unfortunately, this order of justice is not in the character of God described in Jonah and much of the book of Exodus: "The LORD your God, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation." (Exodus 34:6-7) In order to be a God that is shared, God's love and faithfulness must extend to even the enemy. It's part of God's character. Jonah can't stand this! "It is better for me to die than live!" (verse 8). He is unhappy about his God being shared and would rather see a system of justice where the matchbox car gets bopped on the head of the one "illegally playing with it" than embracing them.

Implication: God's character: What is yours is mine and what is mine is yours.

-I've mentioned time and time again how the book of Jonah is written as a comedy and the final chapter with Jonah building *himself* a shelter outside the city after he delivers his pitiful 5 word prophetic message and who speaks to God in the diva-like fashion of "just wanting to die" is no exception to this rule. But as comedy often does, it speaks to the reality of what is going on both in the ancient world (around the time the book was written) and in our present world.

-I briefly read a commentary about a woman who recounted her son being killed by a drunk driver who was also an illegal immigrant from Guatemala. He had a history of armed robbery and grand theft in his country before illegally crossing the border into the United States. "We need to secure our borders so no other person has to go through this," she said. "We need justice," adding: "Americans need to come first."

-Those people are the problem. Punish those people for what they have done. Keep them out. They are not like us. $A+B=C$, this is what justice is right? As much as I laugh at Jonah, I can see myself and my country doing what Jonah did: building a shelter outside the city of Nineveh and waiting for MY structure of justice to take place not wanting to admit that MY God is also THOSE PEOPLE'S God.

-For God says to us in verse 11: "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labor and which you did not grow, it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about illegal immigrants, murderers, Black Lives Matter, people of the LGBT community, women, people of disabilities, drug abusers, or a climate changed earth in which there are more people than you even know who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?"

-Unfortunately or perhaps fortunately for us, God's character and concept of justice is not: $A+B=C$. God's character is: merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. For US and for THEM. God is MY God and YOUR God.

-Before Christianity became an institutionalized religion of the Roman Empire, it made a clear statement about this nature of God in the form of house church communities. In

the days of the Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the letters in the back of our New Testament, there were no church buildings or cathedrals, no official pastors or bishops, no programmatic stewardship campaigns or community studies. The church was a community that radically shared. It saw itself as a “household of God” saying to each other again and again: “this is my body given for YOU. This is my blood given for YOU.” There’s a reason why we don’t go around, take a chunk of bread, and say: “The Body of Christ given for ME.” Christianity, at it’s roots understands the sharing of God in a radical way, that A+B doesn’t always equal C.

-The end of the Book of Jonah is not a “happy ending” like a Hollywood movie or even a Shakespeare comedy. It’s a story that ends with a question, a question that is jarring and which constantly needs to be wrestled with. As much as it’s unsettling for the story to end in a question, I think it makes a lot of sense. For faith doesn’t end in a final statement, but a question. Our walk of faith will always be a question and for most of us a struggle. How can God be MY God and YOUR God? Only when A+B doesn’t always equal C. Amen.