

The persistent and continuing heresy of many Christians is the glib assumption that we, we mere mortals, finite and limited as we are, can know the mind of God. We presume to know precisely what God wants, what God prefers, what God desires, on any subject we care about.

No ambiguity. No hesitation. No nuances of grey. We are so gifted we can answer for God. We have this direct connection with the Divine.

Watch the TV preachers. Listen to the radio evangelists. Read the religious columns in the local newspaper. Tune in on the political talking heads, and you will see what I am talking about.

To strengthen any argument, to put down any contradictory opinion, to convince someone of the rightness of your ideas, all you need to do is attach a little religious veneer to your viewpoint. Find some verse of scripture that may, or may not, apply. Attest that you already know God's mind on this subject, and therefore who would dare challenge you.

Well, all of that is background for me in understanding the delightful story of a man named Jonah.

The story of Jonah for me is an amazingly compact parable about the mind-boggling compassion and love of God. The setting for this prophetic message is around 300 years B.C. It is basically a rebuke to the Jewish people who thought God was their own tribal God, and that God certainly loved them best. In fact, God really only loved them, the favored descendents of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and the 12 tribes of Israel.

Around 300 B.C., if you made a list of Who Do We Hate Most, the winner for the Jews would have been the Assyrians. By then the Assyrians

were no longer a power to be taken seriously, but 400 years earlier they were the bullies of the Middle East. They flamed out about 100 years after their hay day but their ruthlessness and stories of oppression were still vivid in the minds of those who had been persecuted. So, when the story-teller wants to select the greatest villains for the story, the Assyrians and their capital city, Nineveh, get center stage.

The story of Jonah is the attempt of a 3rd century B.C. story-teller to attack the notion that anyone could know the mind of God. Certainly no one of us can understand how capable this amazing God is to love people we think don't deserve God attention, much less God's love and concern.

It is fairly easy to get nice and cozy with God, to think God is close and personal and loves you. It is heresy, in my estimation, to think that God is my personal God, a God who favors me and people like me, and certainly could not be as interested in people not like me.

The defining and illuminating scripture for me is Isaiah 55:8-9. The prophet in exile in Babylon reminds us of our mortal limits.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways,
And my thoughts than your thoughts.”

That ought to keep us from getting too big for our britches, but obviously that hasn't happened. A recent radio evangelist thought he knew the mind of God concerning the end of the world in 2011. When the first widely advertized date passed without the event taking place, he recalculated for a date later in the year, and missed it again. So much for knowing the mind of God.

The Missouri Synod Lutheran Church has issued a strong denouncement, forbidding women to be ordained for Christian ministry. In many local congregations church constitutions also forbid women from voting in those congregations. The denominational statement says, "...we do not believe that ordaining women into the ministry would be God-pleasing." It is one thing to base this decision on long-held church custom. Assuming that we know for certain what is pleasing to God about women in ministry is quite another leap.

Bob Jones University sees itself as the epitome of an educational institution grounded in the scriptures and the teachings of Jesus. For years it has been the university policy to forbid inter-racial contacts between students, no inter-racial dating on campus. They can quote scriptures and attest that such a policy is consistent with the mind of God, but who can be certain he or she knows the mind of God about this?

The Jonah story is not a children's story for me, and I regret that the fish portion is all so many people know about it. Jonah is portrayed as a reluctant prophet who is afraid that God is more generous and more loving than Jonah could ever be. He at first rejects his call to go to Nineveh, not because he was afraid to go but because he feared God would act kindly toward them, the long hated enemy. The fish section of the story was an intriguing, and perhaps playful, way to get Jonah back on task. Instead of escaping in a boat he is burped out on dry land by this fish so he can get on with his work, his calling, to go to Nineveh.

Jonah is so utterly dejected when the people of Nineveh repent and believe. He made the journey hoping for hell fire and brimstone. When the people of Nineveh are saved, Jonah is angry, angry with God.

"O Lord, is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarshish at the beginning; 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."

Somehow Jonah knew that God had the capacity to love the people of Nineveh, the epitome of evil for Jonah and that targeted Jewish audience of the parable. Jonah just wanted them all dead. He pouts, not wanting to witness God's salvation of THEM.

"And now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live."

The irony for me comes at the end of the parable, with Jonah huddled under a dead plant, waiting to die of exposure. Jonah is angry that the bush that had sheltered him had died, grieving for this insignificant dead bush. And so now we come to the adult lesson, the God lesson, from this parable.

Jonah, "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 Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?"

And the story parable ends with this hanging question. Allow me to conclude with some other hanging questions.

Does God only love and care about Christians who claim membership in the United Church of Christ?

Does God prefer and give special treatment to Protestants of all stripes, or can Roman Catholics make it into this select group?

Does God look more kindly on Christians than Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, or can those of no faith also find some favor with God?

Does God like people who support Right To Work legislation more than those who hold membership in a labor union?

Is God partial to straight couples or is there room for same sex couples as well?

Are the people of Cuba or Iran or Pakistan included in the realm of God's love?

Which political platform is more reflective of the mind of God, Republican or Democratic or Libertarian?

Which verses of scripture carry more weight, ones of your choosing, or ones of my choosing?

What life choices are most reflective of the teachings of Jesus?

How could we know, with certainty, what Jesus would do, in any situation?

We scarcely know how birds find their migratory paths. How could we be certain about knowing the mind of God?

Be skeptical of those who say they know.

Be hesitant to speak FOR God, but be very willing to speak ABOUT God, and how you have come to know the blessings of this God.

Be willing to be surprised about what God is doing in our midst.

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