

## The Largeness of God

Not long ago, a lawyer friend of mine asked me what a sacrament is. As I thought about how best to explain our understanding of sacrament, he immediately piped up: “A sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace...!”

A perfect recitation from the catechism in the back of the Prayer Book! “Oh”, I said, “are you a member of the Episcopal Church?”

“Used to be”, he said, “until I studied philosophy. That was the end of my faith.”

A former member of this church, just last week, said the same thing to me as we chatted. “Oh yes, I used to believe, but that ended when I studied philosophy.”

It got me to thinking about our situation these days, as a community, as a world. The study of philosophy was intended to liberate humanity, to break free of what were seen to be chains of superstition and magic. To see the world as it really is. Except, that in the process, we ended up making the world very small indeed.

Man tries to sit on the throne of God, and looks very small indeed. By limiting reality to that which we can see, touch, taste and smell, “reality” becomes shrunken; something tiny and small.

As a result, over these last centuries, we have created a mindset of scarcity, of “not enough”. And that mindset has led us to create societies based on grasping and fearing and fence building. We have, in just the last generation, even managed to apply that smallness to Christianity.

Fundamentalists have cornered, if not our faith, at least they have cornered the bully pulpit in talking about our faith. The tragedy is that fundamentalism is small. It excludes. It judges. It condemns.

Too much of what passes for modern Christianity tries to shrink God to look more like us rather than molding ourselves to look more like God. The largeness of God, God’s love for all of humanity, becomes shrunken

in what passes today for Christianity into a mere tribal god, into a mere love of one's own kind.

Ann Rice, the author of those famous vampire novels, famously became a Roman Catholic several years ago. A few days ago, she just as famously renounced Christianity, although, significantly, she did not renounce Christ.

She said: "In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-birth control. I refuse to be anti-democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life."

Our faith calls us to a largeness of life, a largeness of what is really real, a largeness in who we are meant to become. That call to largeness begins by shifting my gaze from its default position (staring at my own naval) to your needs, especially if you are among the poor, the widows, the orphans.

God, through Isaiah, implores his people to remember who they are and what they are called to become. The point of faith, Isaiah reminds us, is not ritual and right talk; the point of faith is to live out a love of God by loving our neighbor.

It's not rocket science by any means; but very hard to do if one's gaze is on one's bellybutton.

It has struck me on more than one occasion that those who say their faith was lost when they found philosophy, never really grasped faith at all. Faith is not, primarily, about how we think. Faith is, primarily, about what we do. "Seek justice." "Rescue the oppressed." "Defend the orphan." "Plead for the widow." That's not your Rector talking, that is God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, speaking through the prophet Isaiah!

This is the faith God calls us to and no amount of philosophizing can undermine the power of that call. It is a call to do, rather than a call to consider.

Faith is made real in Abraham and Sara, both nearly rotten with old age, barren and guaranteed to die with no heritage. Except the God who is large made them large too. Every Christian, Jewish and Muslim human being traces his or her roots back to this singular couple. Out of what had been an empty womb came descendants more numerous than the stars. Ours is a large God!

And we are a people who are too often afraid.

Into that fear comes Jesus. God incarnate. If freedom from slavery in Egypt isn't enough; if mana in the desert won't do it; if the powerful oration of the prophets falls on deaf ears, so perhaps (we can almost hear God musing) if I become one of you, perhaps then you will embrace the largeness of life that is just waiting to be embraced.

In Jesus, God tells us again and again, we who are frightened, fearful and too small of heart: "Don't be afraid!" "The Kingdom is yours!" Give away what you cling to, so that, with newly empty hands, you may receive the gifts of God!"

The largeness of God is freedom for us. "At the very root of reality is a limitless generosity, and extravagant abundance." [paraphrase, Bruggeman, *An Unsettling God*, Fortress, 2009, 171].

If only we can muster the courage to open our tightly shut eyes, and see.

Becoming open to the largeness of God cannot, I believe, happen in isolation. God is present in the body, in the community, in you and I gathered together. That is where I part ways with Ms. Rice. She, for now, leaves the community. But when the community itself becomes small, the solution is not to leave. No! That is the time for prophets to arise once again, to remind, to cajole, to insist that we never forget that the "ministry of Christ is a ministry of great extravagance. Of a reckless, scandalous spending of his life for the sake of the world's life. \*\*\* It is time to remember that he shunned no one, not even adulterers, not even tax collectors, not even neurotics, not even psychotics, not even those tempted to suicide, not even alcoholics, not even poor people, not even beggars, not even those who betrayed him, not even his enemies. He

shunned no one.” Stringfellow, *A Private and Public Faith*, Wipf&Stock, 1999, 77.

The extravagant largeness of the faith God gives is, as Bishop Robinson put it, is “God’s spirit within us, and indeed within all nature, calling us constantly out of ourselves and beyond ourselves in order to be ourselves.” Robinson, *In the End, God*, Harper, 1968, 13.

God is not “out there”. God is ahead of humanity, leading the way, beckoning you and I to follow.

Blessed are we if we do.

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