

Other gods

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should abandon *Yahweh* to serve other gods.’” — Joshua 24:16.

If you know anything about preachers in the 1800s you know a sermon an hour and a half long was considered a short sermon. And, indeed, in that era on Sunday evenings, here in this church, people often came back for a second dose of sermonizing.

And, if you have ever read personal letters written in 1800s, I think the modern reaction to them would be clear. My, but these people were long-winded. Short was rare.

Today both sermons and correspondence tend to be more concise, especially when we communicate with computers or smart phones. Can you say ‘Facebook,’ ‘Twitter?’ However, sometimes longer conversations do happen even on computers.

And so it was when an old friend engaged me by e-mail a couple of weeks ago. I had taken the first step. I sent him a *New York Times* article about how inadequate Scripture translations are. This is the gist and a truncated version I might add of our e-mail conversation, the conversation which followed.

“Interesting article,” said my friend. “I have always felt Christianity lost touch with its roots, its beliefs. What we need to pay attention to is the teaching of Jesus.”

“In fact,” he continued, “much of what Jesus taught was political, since it proposed a revolution against Rome. And the leaders in Israel supported the Roman power structure.”

“The writer Reza Aslan,” who by the way, spoke at the New York Conference Annual Meeting two years ago, “Reza Aslan says the teachings of Christ can be viewed as subversive but through peaceful means since Israel was not powerful enough to confront Rome. And the Roman culture undermined Judaism.”

I responded. “The observation about the teaching of Jesus is interesting but it is something only people from a Christian culture would say. You see, nothing Jesus taught was new.”

“Everything Jesus taught can be found in the Hebrew Scriptures. That leaves us not with the question most people ask: ‘Who is Jesus’ but with the questions ‘Does God exist?’ and ‘If God exists, how do you describe God?’”

“If Jesus is a part of that description then a Trinitarian description of God comes into play. If not, then a unitarian, monotheistic description of God comes into play.”

“However and in truth, even the Jews did not really have a unitarian, monotheistic God, not the way we describe that today. In fact, God the Creator, God the Redeemer and the Spirit are all evident and referenced in the Hebrew Scriptures.”

“It takes over three centuries,” I wrote, “for Christians to say how Jesus fits in with this Jewish God and that is the Trinitarian description. By the way,” I added, “*Yahweh* is the name of the Jewish God. It is a word which means ‘to be’ for all you fans of existentialism.”

“As to the existence of God, if you say ‘God does not exist’ that becomes your God. God is an a priori concept. The philosopher Immanuel Kant addressed that in the work *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Oh, well,” I said. “That is really too much thinking for one night,” I wrote as I signed off.

Minutes later he wrote back. “Yeah— that definitely makes my head hurt!” (Slight pause.)

We find these words recorded in Joshua: “Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should abandon *Yahweh* to serve other gods.’” (Slight pause.)

I have said this before. Scientists tell us the universe is 18.8 Billion Light Years across. If that does not make you head hurt to just think about it, you’re doing it wrong. And, if thinking about God— about who God is, about how we describe God— does not make your head hurt when you just think about God, you’re doing it wrong. (Slight pause.)

You see and for instance, there exists a tendency to reduce Jesus to mere teachings as my friend did. And there is tendency is to make God friendly, simple, accessible. We domesticate God. We put God in a box.

A domesticated God is not an option offered by Scripture. Theologian Walter Brueggemann says the God of Scripture is written with remarkable, intentional, artistic illusiveness— *remarkable, intentional, artistic illusiveness*. The God of Scripture is very complex. And to domesticate God, to reduce God to a manageable package is to reduce God to meaninglessness. (Slight pause.)

So, does God exist? I hope this is obvious. For me the answer to the question is ‘yes.’ Therefore, the words uttered by Joshua: “as for me I will serve God” resonate with me.

Now, there is something said in this passage which is often overlooked. Joshua tells the people to (quote:), “...throw away the foreign gods among you and turn your hearts toward *Yahweh*....”

Please note: the monotheism of this era was not like what we picture today. The Israelites would have believed and admitted other gods were real. In fact, people would carry around little statues representing other gods.

Therefore, when Joshua tells them to throw away the foreign gods, what is being addressed are these little statues. And throwing them away is not just a physical gesture. It is an emotional gesture. And then Joshua invites people to turn their hearts toward God. (Slight pause.)

Question: what little statues, what foreign gods, what other gods might we have and might we be invited to throw away? I think many of us, myself included, probably have a stash of foreign gods, other gods.

I will not be foolish enough to name my set of gods or try to name your set of gods. They are just probably not little statues we carry around. But we really all have them— little gods.

So, instead of addressing these little gods, I want to ask a question. Since I’ve made the statement God does exist, “to where does the God of Scripture call us?” I think that question has an obvious answer. God calls us to the mission of striving toward, working toward the reality of the Dominion of God, the realm of God— here, now.

And what is the reality of the Dominion, the realm of God? And how does one work toward that reality?

I believe we work toward the reality of the Dominion, the realm through what is generally called mission. And

each local church, especially in the Congregational tradition, finds its own mission.

In a recent newsletter I said this church can be called a mission and music church. And often these two—mission and music intertwine. On the music side of this, the fast approaching Advent Cantata and the fact that we occasionally do a morning service at Chenango Valley home with the full choir are two examples of mission.

Now outside of music, I think I have made it clear—I certainly have said it many times—that every dollar someone puts in the plate or pledges we give away. And the real world reality of that statement is simple: money counts. How? We strive to use what is given to help people, real people with real needs, in a prudent way.

Let me point to just one of those things we do to help. The fast approaching Turkey Basket program helps real people with real needs. In case you do not know this, people who get signed up for a basket are based on referrals from social service agencies. Hence, we identify people with real need.

These names are entered on a data base and duplicates are eliminated. We thereby work to use resources prudently. (Slight pause.)

All that is to say two things. First, yes—thinking about God, about who God is, about how we describe God—should make your head hurt. If it does not, you're doing it wrong.

Second, working toward the Dominion of God—mission—is perhaps not as stressful, not as painful trying to describe God. And what is our mission? Our mission is to help people.

Helping people is an outward sign that we, this church, seeks the justice, peace, freedom and equity of the Dominion toward which we are working. That mission, thereby, points toward the reality of God. You see, God really has only one description. God calls us to help others. Amen.

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “I do want to call your attention to the fact that there is a whole insert today with thoughts for meditation concerning stewardship. [1] The one to which I want to call your attention is from the *History of the First One Hundred Years of the First Congregational Church, Norwich, New York 1814-1914*, by C. R. Johnson, the Clerk of this Church for better than 50 years. (Quote:) ‘Selling church pews was the rule for the first half century of this church.... The Gospel plan is fast coming into favor—absolutely free pews and weekly contributions,.... It takes a long time and a good deal of argument to get people to trust God, and it is doubtful if they will be willing to do it entirely this side of heaven.’”

BENEDICTION: The knowledge that God loves us frees us for joyous living. So, let us trust in the love God offers. Let us also be fervent in prayer as we make choices daily, and seek to do God's will and walk in God's way as we travel on our Christian journey. And may the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and the abiding truth of Christ keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge, love and companionship of the Holy Spirit this day and forever more. Amen.

[1.] This is the content of the insert.

THOUGHTS FOR MEDITATION —

“Selling church pews was the rule for the first half century of this church.... The Gospel plan is fast coming into favor—absolutely free pews and weekly contributions,.... It takes a long time and a good deal of argument to

get people to trust God, and it is doubtful if they will be willing to do it entirely this side of heaven;...” — *History of the First One Hundred Years of the First Congregational Church, Norwich, New York 1814-1914*, by C. R. Johnson

“I think you will find / When your death takes its toll / All the money you made / Will never buy back your soul.” — Bob Dylan

“The bread that you possess belongs to the hungry. The clothes that you store in boxes, belong to the naked. The shoes rotting by you, belong to the bare-foot. The money that you hide belongs to anyone in need.” — Saint Basil, fourth century theologian and monastic

“You have not lived a perfect day, even though you have earned your money, unless you have done something for someone who cannot repay you.” — Ruth Smeltzer

“Remember this— you can’t serve God and Money, but you can serve God with money.” — Selwyn Hughes

“Stewardship is a theological way of seeing that begins with God as creator.” — Arthur Van Seters, Vancouver School of Theology.

“An imbalance between rich and poor is the oldest and most fatal ailment of all republics.” — Plutarch (CE 46 – CE 120)

“Too many have dispensed with generosity in order to practice charity.” — Albert Camus (1913 - 1960)

“The only gift is giving to the poor; all else is exchange.” — Thiruvalluvar, poet ©. 30 B.C.E.)

“The good we secure for ourselves is precarious and uncertain until it is secured for all of us and incorporated into our common life.” — Jane Addams — 1860 - 1935, the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize

“A church is not measured by the beauty of its architecture but by the deeds of the congregation.” — Coretta Scott King

“Wealth shines in giving rather than in hoarding: for the miser is hateful, whereas the generous man is applauded.” — Boethius (480-524?), Roman statesman, philosopher

“Examples are few of those ruined by giving.” — Christian Bovée

“People go through three conversions: their head, their heart and their pocketbook. Unfortunately, not all at the same time.” — Martin Luther (1483-1546),

“Never measure your generosity by what you give, but rather by what you have left.” — Bishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895-1979),

“One verse in every six in the first three Gospels relates, either directly or indirectly, to money. Sixteen of our Lord’s 44 parables deal with the use or misuse of money. A loving, joyful, liberal giving to the Lord’s work is an acid test of a spiritual heart, pleasing to God.” — William E. Allen

“In the Holy Land are two ancient bodies of water. Both are fed by the Jordan River. In one, fish play and roots find sustenance. In the other, there is no splash of fish, no sound of bird, no leaf around. The difference is not in the Jordan, for it empties into both, but in the Sea of Galilee: for every drop taken in one goes out. It gives and lives. The other gives nothing. And it is called the Dead Sea.” — William Sloane Coffin

“One of the reasons churches in North America have trouble guiding people about money is that the church’s economy is built on consumerism. If churches see themselves as suppliers of religious goods and services and their congregants as consumers, then offerings are ‘payment.’” — Doug Pagitt,

“Choose rather to want less, than to have more.: — Thomas à Kempis (ca. 1380-1471),

“We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give.” — Winston Churchill (1874-1965),