

"RECALCULATING"

By Pastor Mary Anne Biggs

Fifth Sunday in Lent ~ March 22, 2015

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ~ John 12:20-33

Who am I to teach you all about God? Who am I to tell you what God is like? I do have a few experiences with God, but I'm sure you do, too. In all my experience I think I have learned most about God from being a parent. Yes, I think that's it. I remember just before our son was born how much I looked forward to being a Mom. I was going to correct every mistake my parents made with me. I was going to be perfect. I knew children need loving limits, so I was going to set clear limits and keep them absolutely. I would explain it all in a loving logic that would compel him to gentle obedience. It was all so simple in my mind.

I rejoiced the day he was born. I held him closely in my arms. And that's just about the time when I began to lose control. I couldn't wait for him to talk, until he learned to talk. I had heard that the first word children usually learn is "no." They hear it so much. What I didn't realize was that he would be saying "no" to me! "Eat your breakfast." "No!" "Take this medicine." "No!" "Go to sleep now." "No!" And that was year one! Eight years later our daughter Mary Cate was born and I remember talking to my father one day about her profound streak of independence. My dad asked me, "Well, Mary Anne, does she know what 'No' means?" And I answered, "Yes Daddy, she does, and when she says it ... she means it!" He just laughed and said that reminded him of another little girl he knew!

I am proud of both of our children. Each one is a special gift from God in my life. But parenting is hard. It is one long continuous re-negotiation. If they can't get you to agree, they will do their best to try to wear you down. Of course, sometimes situations are non-negotiable, but you have to negotiate which ones those are. God bless all parents and all their children. And God help us.

But out of my experience, I have new eyes to see who God is because the Bible says we are all God's children. I never knew how proud I could be ... I never knew how connected I could feel ... I never knew how worried I could get ... I never knew how angry I could be ... I never knew how deeply I could love ... I never knew how limited I was ... until I had children. Since the first day I held them in my arms, and saw my face reflected in their eyes, they have been teaching me about myself. And they have been teaching me about God.

For instance, I realize now how God has parented humanity down through the years since the first humans started saying "no" to God. It's an amazing thing when you think about it. God told the prototypes, Adam and Eve, not to eat from the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, because on the day they did, they would die (Gen 2:16-17). They ate it, of course. Any parent could have predicted it, and God shouted and grumbled and complained. There were dire consequences, but notice this. They didn't die right then on that day the way God had said they

would. God re-negotiated the consequences. "Okay," God soon said, "I'll wipe the slate clean and start over with Noah's family." After the flood, God made an agreement never to destroy the earth this way again, and the new prototype, the new model, Noah, turned right around and messed up again. But God didn't give up.

"I'll raise up a people and give them the Torah, the law. It will tell them who I am ... and what I expect ... and they will know me by following these clear guidelines that I am giving them for their own good." God called Moses ... freed the Hebrews from slavery ... led them out into the wilderness to make a covenant ... a clear agreement about who God would be for them and who they would be for God. Moses went up on Mount Sinai, and God said, "Take these two tablets and call me in the morning." But those stone tablets were hard to swallow and the Hebrews were worshipping the golden calf before Moses could even get down the mountain with the tablets of the law.

God was angry, almost ready to obliterate them, and they deserved it. But God re-negotiated again. "All right ... all right. I see we need a way to repair this relationship when you break it, so here is a whole system of sacrifices through which you can turn around and come back and rededicate yourself to me when you break the limits that I have set." But parenting is hard. And it didn't work. God's children wandered away ... decided that they knew best ... worshiped the things they made by hand, and got themselves into trouble.

By Jeremiah's time, God had bailed them out again and again and again. God had relented from wiping them out completely and starting over. Jeremiah, in his wisdom, diagnosed the problem ... it was heart disease. Jeremiah decided that the children of God were organically incapable of keeping boundaries and staying in good relation with God. Keep in mind that in the Hebrew language, the heart is not only the seat of emotion, but also the seat of the intellect, and of the will. "*The human heart is desperately perverse! Who can understand it?*" said a frustrated Jeremiah. Every parent knows this. And our parents learned it before us. That's why they smile knowingly when we complain about their grandchildren. But who can explain why children refuse to listen to the experience and wisdom of the very people who love them best ... and want what is best for them in the world? "*The human heart is desperately perverse! Who can understand it?*"

God answered Jeremiah: "*I understand it.*" Then God re-negotiated once more:

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

If it was a problem of the heart, then God would change their hearts. God would make their very own hearts - and minds - and wills - the direct meeting place. They would all "know" God ... meaning an intimate knowledge ... deep ... abiding ... relational knowledge ... from the heart.

This was not the kind of knowledge that could be learned from a book. This was about a heart to heart closeness.

You see, this re-negotiated covenant that God explained to Jeremiah had the same goal as the first ... it was what all parents want eventually with their children ... a loving, mutual relationship of support and respect that flows out to all the family and even beyond. The Bible calls this "shalom," a kind of cosmic harmony. But this was a radical new deal God was making here ... because now it wasn't about memorizing rules from the book or following a prescribed ritual. God even told Jeremiah that we wouldn't need scribes ... that we wouldn't need teachers ... that we wouldn't need preachers ... to be the experts on God any longer. The scripture would be written on our hearts. God will be revealed within us, in our own direct experience of God.

That's why Frederick Buechner urges that you "listen to your life." God is there. Take a closer look. Meet God in your own heart ... in your own life ... in your own adventures in being. If you want to know about a person ... read her resume. If you want to know a person ... spend time with her. If you want to know about God ... read the Bible. If you want to know God ... meet God in the contours of your own experience. Meet God in your own human heart, and in the hearts around you. That's the way God told Jeremiah that this new covenant was going to work.

I must warn you, this is scandalous theology. Who ever heard of a group of people believing that every person is as much an expert on God as the next ... because every child of God has the same Holy Spirit in his or her heart? Well, they used to be called "reformers," and reformers called that "the priesthood of the believers." Who ever heard of a God who kept ignoring God's own rules ... setting aside consequences ... forgiving people anyway ... and continually re-negotiating the relationship? That's still called "grace" ... but people have a hard time believing in it. This is the absurd picture of "God as parent" that we get in the New Testament. God is a shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep behind to search all over creation for one lost lamb. God is a woman turning her house upside down to find one lost coin. And God is a father who waits at the gate ... watching for his reprobate son to come home again so that he can kill the fatted calf and have a family picnic.

The Greek philosophers called God "the unmoved Mover," and a lot of the church has followed this picture. God created the world. God set the rules. God stepped back and let it run. God is perfect, which means God never changes because if you are perfect and you change, you can only change to being imperfect. So the rules are the rules ... are the rules ... established forever ... absolutely non-negotiable. And you better follow them or you're going to hell. But thank God, I have a different understanding of God.

The DNA that I was born with determined that I would be left-handed ... have brown eyes ... and go through life with no sense of direction. As some of you can testify ... I can't tell the difference between east and west ... and I can get lost in a closet so, it makes perfect sense that I should have a GPS system in my car. But for some reason I have resisted. Maybe because I have met some pretty nice folks when I've had to stop for directions ... maybe because I secretly enjoy that rush of adrenaline that I get when I am helplessly lost ... maybe because I truly enjoy that rush of gratitude that I get when I actually reach my destination.

My niece shares the same trait, but she has relies on her Garmin. While riding with her I listened carefully to that omniscient voice telling her what to do turn-by-turn. If she disobeyed the command to turn “left in fifty feet” the voice would then come back on and merely say “recalculating.” No judgment, no anger, no reproach ... just “recalculating.”

As I thought about that it occurred to me that this is a good visual, or perhaps audial, image of our still speaking God. God has a plan for us ... a direction for our lives ... a path that leads to wholeness ... a path that can transform our hearts and sanctify us for God’s good service. But we often stray from that path. And yet time after time ... when we do ... God simply recalculates. God will never wipe God’s hands of us. And the Bible shows us a God that my experience confirms. *This is a God* who comes to people who are already going through hell ... the hell of their own choosing, and says, "No. Not there. Come this way instead." *This is a God* who keeps re-calculating and re-negotiating the rules. *This is a God* who offers unconditional grace ... and grace is always scandalous because grace breaks the rules no matter how you slice it. *This is a God* who has no use for "experts on God" who make everybody else obey their version of righteousness in God's name. *This is God* who is right there with each person and makes every believer his or her own expert on God. *This is a God* who comes in person and stays close. *This is a God* who is emotionally available and flexibly responsive to our behavior. *This is a God* who loves her children so much, that she just won't give up on them. *This is a God* who keeps coming back to have her heart broken again and again and again by their rebellion ... beyond the limits of any human parent I know. *This is a God* who goes all the way to the cross and suffers and dies, then comes back again to say: "I still love you. And I am still with you. I'm not giving up. I'm not going away. I am not leaving you alone, even to the end of the world." *This is a God* who is re-calculating . *This is a God* who is still speaking!

I know from my own experience ... that in the “give and take” of our relationship ... God never quits loving anybody. And as a parent, I understand now how you can love somebody even when you're angry with them ... and more than anything else you are angry with them for what they are doing to themselves or to their brothers and sisters. I understand how love means being in a constant re-negotiation as you are struggling from your heart to connect with the heart of another free and willful person. I understand now a little of how God feels when we tell God to “talk to the hand” and do what we please anyway, because I have broken the rules and stepped over the boundaries and done things that hurt myself and others. I'm not ashamed to tell you this because I know you've done the same. We've all wandered into our far countries at one time or another and dined on the pods the pigs wouldn't eat. But when we are lost ... there is God recalculating ... waiting to throw us a picnic and say, "All is forgiven. Welcome home, child. Welcome home."

May we pray?

O God our Father, both the Bible and our own hearts tell us that we don't deserve the kind of love you have shown us. Thank you for not giving up, for never giving up, on finding a way to be with us.

O God our Mother, You gave us life and nurtured us from infancy. You have healed our wounds even when we have wounded you. Thank you for not giving up, for never giving up, on finding a way to help us.

O God our Savior, We are your children, and all people are our brothers and sisters. Touch us with your grace in our deepest heart of hearts - in our minds and wills, too - that we may know you as you know us from the inside out, and show your love in all the family you have given us, from now until forever, as we celebrate the new covenant you have given us. Amen.