

Trinity Sunday
May 22, 2016

"MAKING THE RIGHT CONNECTIONS"
by Mary Anne Biggs

Romans 5:1-5 ~ John 16:12-15

We are in the process of reviewing our staff job descriptions to ready ourselves for our annual reviews. Coincidentally I received an email this week that contained excerpts taken from actual job performance reviews in the secular world. Here are some of my favorites: - *Since my last report, this employee has reached rock bottom and started to dig.* - *This young lady has delusions of adequacy.* And here is my personal favorite - *This employee should go far, and the sooner he starts, the better.*

Trust me, our wonderful staff would never receive those kinds of comments. But do you ever wish you could give God a job performance review? What do you think of God today? Has God exceeded your expectations? Or has your God been too little ... too late when you really needed help? Oh, I know. Who are we to judge God? It's not our place. But whose place is it? Who is God's supervisor?

Actually, most of us do give God performance evaluations in the form of our prayers ... in the form of our actions ... in the form of our testimony in the court of human opinion. I heard two testimonies of God recently which struck me by comparison.

A friend of mine from seminary called ... a woman with a tender heart and gentle spirit. Until last summer she was the pastor of a small rural church. But she left the ministry. She lost her faith. She had always wrestled with intellectual doubts, but a pastoral crisis was the last straw. A woman, beloved in her church, died of cancer in spite of many prayers on her behalf, and she was powerless to help. People who hadn't prayed in years voiced their pleas to God for this woman ... the whole community rallied to bring her through. And my friend said, it seemed to her not that God answered with a "no" but that God didn't answer at all ... did nothing at all in response to the earnest pleas to save her life. She realized she was no longer even sure that God exists, so she left. My friend is on an honest spiritual journey, and will accept no inauthentic easy answers. But she gives God an inferior job performance rating based on what she's seen so far.

But I have also had the opportunity to speak with a clergy colleague who told me of the long and painful illness of her grandmother. Many people prayed for her, but the illness continued, she suffered deeply, and then she died. What my friend observed in that experience was the presence of God with her family ... the strong witness of her grandmother through her pain ... and the power that came from beyond for her grandfather to make hard decisions when the rest of the family was about to fall apart. Hers is an authentic journey, too, but in very similar circumstances she gives God a superior performance rating.

Here are two sincere, honest, persons on a serious journey of faith. How could they have such similar experiences and make such opposite logical and emotional connections? They are in good company. As Walter Breuggemann notes, the Bible itself surprisingly gives both testimony and counter-testimony of God. Israel praises God for remembering promises to their ancestors and hearing their prayers and delivering them from slavery in Egypt. A thousand years later, they praise God for being with them in the wilderness of exile and bringing them back home. But personal experience provides the most powerful *counter*-testimony. The psalmist cries: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?*" (Psalm 22:1). This is not just a philosophical question. More than a third of the psalms are laments like this ... crying to an absent or inactive God out of the depths of suffering. The book of Job, the Lamentations, Jeremiah's confessions, all question the faithfulness of God. The people ask, as each generation asks, "*Is the Lord among us or not?*" (Ex 17:7). And the New Testament tells us of both cross and resurrection ... darkness and light ... abandonment and rescue ... despair and hope ... testimony and counter-testimony concerning God.

What leads one person to find God in the midst of sorrow and another to feel abandoned by God? How do we make the right connections between our experience and our faith? The Apostle Paul suffered much in his lifetime. He was vilified by his colleagues in ministry ... criticized in his churches ... beaten by strangers ... stoned and left for dead ... imprisoned ... tried ... narrowly escaped several riots ... all because of his claims that God's Messiah has come and brought the love of God for every person. His suffering couldn't have been what Paul expected of the Messiah. If the Messiah comes, you expect Joel Osteen's promise that God will make you rich. You expect Bennie Hinn's promise that God will heal your infirmities. You expect Pat Robertson's promise that God will help you win elections. Who wants a God who will bring you pain?

After what he's been through, who would blame Paul for telling God what he can do with his gospel? But his testimony is neither bitter nor unbelieving. He says, "*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God*" (Rom 5:1-2). Faith has brought Paul to a sense of connection with God that transcends the vagaries of human suffering. He trusts beyond what he can see ... and his trust brings him peace in spite of evidence to the contrary. He goes on to say, "*And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*" Paul's suffering is constitutive of his character. He is glad for what he has become by overcoming adversity with God's help ... so that he even embraces his adversity ... accepts his suffering as a necessary and somehow liberating part of his journey.

In *Who Needs God?* Rabbi Harold Kushner observes that faith does not change the facts ... but it changes the way we look at the facts of our existence. And while we may give God a poor job performance evaluation in the moment ... job performance evaluations are always interim reports. You don't know how you have done in a job until you have finished the job, until you are fired or quit or retire. All of which is to say, God isn't finished yet.

Much of our disillusionment with God is caused by the illusions about God we had in the first place ... illusions some boneheaded preacher taught us ... or that the tradition has mistakenly transformed into an idol ... to replace the living God with the institutionalized God of entrenched human power. An *honest* faith has many questions to ask of God, and not a few things to forgive of God. An *enduring* faith trusts that God will be able to answer those questions when the time comes and will win a superior job performance review. What other God can do the job better? A *humble* faith knows that we have a very limited viewpoint. We are not God and cannot understand the why of all things from our place in reality and our point in time. Thus Jesus told his disciples, *"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come"* (John 16:12-13). In other words, there are a lot of things we just don't understand yet, which God will have to show us later.

But Paul's *positive* faith arises from more than his own trust ... and is more than just a faithful interpretation of the hard facts. What ultimately helps him overcome his suffering is God's love poured into his heart by God's Spirit ... apart from the people of God who have failed him. And this love frees Paul from being bitter even towards his persecutors. You see, Paul is not the lone prophet we think him to be. He depends on the communion of saints ... fellow travelers who verify his faith and embody God's love to him. The church at Antioch finances his missionary travels. The Philippian church supports him through thick and thin. The church at Ephesus encourages him in his ministry. And he has hope that the Roman church will do the same. In other words, Paul is assisted by the community of believers, which is ... in its own broken and flawed way ... the incarnation of God's love for a broken and flawed humanity.

Even Paul ... stubborn, independent, overbearing ... needs the community to support his faith. God has made us for relationship, and we have no spiritual life without it. We are made in God's image, and even our image of God as Trinity ... three in one ... models community ... unity in diversity ... a necessarily relational existence. What's more, our incarnational theology ... that God is revealed through human flesh ... that we encounter God through the Christ in each other ... reminds us that we are connected to one another and need a community to have faith for us when we are at that point in our journey where we cannot. That community might be a traditional institutional organization (and in spite of its sins ... even though it needs continual reformation from within ... the institution has carried the gospel to us down through the ages) or it might be a disorganized gathering of friends who pray and watch out for each other. In any case, it's what the Bible calls church.

The word religion comes from the Latin *ligio*, to bind, as in *Blest Be the Tie*. Religion is the ligament of spiritual life. It is the recognition that in some way beyond our understanding, good and evil, suffering and glory, pain and gain are bound together. They are all connected, and God is in it all. It is a recognition that we are inextricably bound to God, to one another, to our friends, to our enemies, to all humankind. Religion at its best is our attempt to improve the quality of these connections ... and at its worst becomes our way to resist them.

Like it or not, God has created us for relationship, and faith is a journey. People are bound to fail you. The church is bound to fail you. Even God will seem to fail you at times ... that is the

testimony of scripture. But faith is staying faithful to the journey ... even in those places where it seems that God is distant and people are dangerous and we have been betrayed. Faith is wrestling with God like Jacob, until the dawn breaks and we get God's blessing. Faith is staying connected and joining the community that brings you life against the powers of death at work within you.

So if you want to give God a poor job performance evaluation up to now, go ahead. You're in good biblical company. Be creative. Write it down: "Regularly tardy ... high rate of absenteeism ... resists supervision ... raises expectations, then fails to meet them. Undoubtedly the best in the business at what he does, but seems preoccupied with his own agenda." Cry out, complain, put God on probation. But don't give up on God, because there are no other substitutes that will work out in the long run. God can hear your unhappiness in the meantime ... but keep to the journey ... keep telling God what you feel.

Of course, ultimately we aren't God's supervisors. It's the other way round, and I don't know about you, but I shudder to think of the job performance review I deserve from God: "Hit rock bottom and started to dig ... delusions of adequacy ... she should go far, and the sooner she starts, the better."

But you know what? Knowing by his own experience how hard this spiritual journey is, Christ has already given you a superior job performance review. As Paul goes on to say, "*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:1). That's the good news we celebrate today. You are not forgotten, not abandoned, not rejected. You are not condemned. You are connected to God and to all humanity because God is connected to you in Christ. Thanks be to God! May we pray?

Good God, help us, because our minds cannot contain the knowledge of you; our hearts cannot contain the love of you; our lives cannot contain the glory of you. We stumble around in the dark bumping in to blunt objects, bumping into each other, with precious little light to guide us along ... and life hurts. We don't understand, and we get angry with you. We try to go it alone, but we can't make it alone. That's when we discover you have been with us all along. Restore our trust. Heal us, and help us get where we need to be. In the meantime, thank you for the spiritual fellow travelers you give us for the journey. And teach us to tend our relationships with one another and with you until you bring us safely home, through Jesus Christ our guide and companion on the journey. Amen.