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I'm Not Sure About A God Who....

7. Who Seems So Demanding and Self-Absorbed

Deuteronomy 5:6-7 New Revised Standard Version "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me."

Exodus 34:14 New Revised Standard Version You shall worship no other god, because the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.

Psalms 40:4 The Message Those who put their trust in the Lord, who pay no attention to the proud or to those who follow lies, are truly happy!

Matthew 6:24 The Message "You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other. Adoration of one feeds contempt for the other. You can't worship God and Money both."

Bird watchers who love to put up birdhouses and bird feeders in their yards usually have no love lost for squirrels, who are amazingly good at defeating the various impediments to bird feeders that homeowners try to put in their way. Squirrels are also known for eating their way into attics and doing a huge amount of damage. One of our First Christian folks once told me about a squirrel that had accidentally gotten into her house and proceeded to do thousands of dollars' worth of damage. No wonder someone once said "Squirrels are just like rats, except with better public relations." Speaking of public relations, some of the food we eat has been made possible by clever public relations re-branding. You might turn up your nose at the thought of eating something called a "Patagonian Toothfish," but this bottom-dwelling species became a delicacy when through the miracle of good p.r. it became "Chilean Sea Bass." You likely wouldn't be tempted by a delicacy called "Slimefish," but through good p.r. it has now actually become an endangered species after it was re-named "Orange Roughy."¹ Researchers at Cornell University did an experiment with five

¹<http://www.upworthy.com/5-fish-got-different-names-and-now-theyre-so-expensive-it-hurts>

elementary schools in which the vegetables on the school lunch menu were re-named. After broccoli was re-branded “Tiny Tasty Tree Tops,” children bought it at a 99% greater rate!² Maybe if my elementary school had thought of that 50 years ago I wouldn’t be so confirmedly carnivorous.

These days, it seems that God, too, might could use a good public relations firm. One study recently said that just sixteen percent of non-Christians in their late teens and twenties had a positive impression of God. Digging deeper, that study asked what words they associated with the Christian conception of God, and eighty-seven percent said “judgmental.”³ God’s people, it would also seem, might need better public relations. Americans are leaving the Christian faith at a faster rate than every before in our history and that rate is accelerating. One-in-five Americans now claims no religious affiliation and that number is one-in-three for eighteen-to-thirty-three-year-olds. Seventy percent of them cite what they believe that the Church teaches about God’s attitude toward gay and lesbian folks as the reason for leaving the faith.⁴

I had a conversation with someone in our church last week who said “It’s just so hard for me to believe that people think of God and the Church as judgmental and demanding and concerned with things that seem irrelevant in the face of such injustice in the world. It’s so hard for me to believe,” she continued, “because I have experienced the Church as a community of people who truly want to be loving, and God as a God of grace and comfort and justice.” I wanted to applaud and say “Bravo!” But what you need to know this morning is that such understandings are increasingly NOT the understandings of Church and God all around us. More and more, folks outside

²http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/17/renaming-fruits-and-vegetables_n_1891562.html

³<http://www.charismanews.com/opinion/watchman-on-the-wall/46618-why-are-so-many-christians-turning-into-atheists>

⁴http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/millennials-gay-unaffiliated-church-religion_n_4856094.html

these doors do believe God to be judgmental and even bullying, keeping score of personal peccadilloes, and scowling in the face of tattoos and piercings but not much concerned about justice and goodness in society.

Once again, though, and as we have seen in other sermons in this series, you can understand why folks might say these sorts of things based, in part, on some of the things they find in the Bible. After all, it says it right there in Exodus: God is a jealous God. And yet this is once of those references that should call us to return to what we have learned this summer about the nature of the Bible. As I have said before, the Bible is not a book of verses, all with equal weight, it is not a compilation of computer source code. No, it's a conversation in which is recorded both sides of things, some of which are more representative of the folks writing and some of which are more and more representative of the trend in the Bible towards a more and more loving and inclusive understanding of God. And so with a little historical background, we can read those lines about God's being a jealous God as saying more about a people at the time of the writing of this verse who were threatened and beleaguered by enemies and who believed that they needed to huddle up than it does about God. And, after all, jealousy is rooted in fear of loss, and the Hebrew people during their long, scary, journey through the desert after leaving Egypt were profoundly fearful. Moreover, just as in our own relationships, we sometimes project what most scares us about ourselves onto the other person, and it's certainly not unknown – even in the Bible – for people to do the same thing to God.

Non-Christians sometimes also look at other things that can be found in the Bible and come to the conclusion that God is demanding, self-absorbed, self-centered, and wonder why we would worship such a being. You can certainly see why two of our scriptures this morning can give rise to that question: The very first of the Ten Commandments – “You shall have no other Gods before me” – and then Jesus’

referencing that commandment when he says ““You can't worship two gods at once. Loving one god, you'll end up hating the other.” Here's what I want to say about these two verses: those who think that these somehow are pointing to a jealous, self-absorbed God implicitly read such verses as threats. They see God as threatening them if they don't toe the line. But they are not threats at all, they are simply **statements of fact** about our lives. What do I mean?

Well, let's look at just the First Commandment, “You shall have no other Gods before me.” We read it, we hear it, but we forget that it comes with an explanation, the words that come just before the commandment. Hear those words again: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” The point? God is a God who seeks to free us from whatever is trapping us, whatever fear is hurting us. Taken as a whole, this verse simply is acknowledging the reality that if you and I don't worship a God who is about freedom and liberation, we WILL worship something else. We WILL give in to our fears. We WILL create idols who are not about freedom at all and we WILL begin to insist that everyone bow down to them. We WILL begin to prefer lies over truth. We WILL prefer the slick, over-simple easy answers over accepting the fact that life is ambiguous and seldom amenable to quick and slick fixes. If our God is not the God who brings people – *ALL people* – out of whatever Egypt is enslaving them, we will invariably begin to draw lines between people and even demonize and dehumanize them. We will forget that throughout the Bible God has shown a special love for the immigrant and the foreigner and has reminded us again and again that the signal most important virtue of life lived under a gracious God is that of hospitality not fearfulness of “the other.”

Writer John Pavolovitz puts it this way: When folks forget that God is a god of freedom for all people, then “fear... become[s] their false God.... [and] When Fear is your God, you... turn all of your attention to the things in other people that you're certain

really tick God off, and you make it your sacred business to modify their behavior in the name of Jesus.”⁵ Let me put it this way: the First Commandment is not a threat; it’s a statement of fact about your life and mine. The 17th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal said that every human being has a "God-shaped hole" in the heart that is seeking to be filled. My friends, if that hole is not filled by devotion to a God who loves all people and wants all people to be free, then it WILL get filled by fear – and fear causes us to hurt ourselves and others, causes us to trample on our best values, causes us presume the worst about others instead of the best, and causes us to see difference as threat instead of gift. *That’s* why “You shall have no other Gods before me.”

Our final scripture this morning is from the Psalms, those 150 songs that for untold generations have been a source of comfort and challenge for countless Jews and Christians – and on which I will be preaching a sermon series this fall. And this is a worthy place to begin to close this morning’s sermon for Psalm 40’s words here cannot be read as a threat and cannot give ammunition for those who would claim God is demanding and self-absorbed. For you see, Psalm 40 is a blessing, a benediction really. Most of us know it by its traditional translations, “Happy is the one” or “Blessed is the one” but Eugene Petersen’s translation can also ring fresh in our ears this morning: “Those who put their trust in the Lord, who pay no attention to the proud or to those who follow lies, are truly happy!” I spent some time with this verse this week because you and I know that on the face of it, sometimes being Christian doesn’t make you happy at all. Sometimes it makes you feel different, sometimes it makes you downright uncomfortable when your faith and your Bible ask you to love the unlovely and not to fear the unfamiliar. But there are two things I learned while studying this verse: first, in the original languages, the word for “happy” or “blessed” is **plural** in form. And that tells

⁵<http://johnpavlovitz.com/2015/01/15/the-greatest-false-idol-of-modern-christianity/>

me something. That tells me that you and I

- Need each other to keep ourselves strong in the faith and resistant to those who would tell us lies and play to our fearfulness.
- We need each other to widen our empathies and push back against those lines that fear tries to scribble on our hearts.
- We need each other to strengthen our hope when violence scares us and justice systems fail us and when those who serve us are killed by cowards.
- We need each other when grief overcomes us and we only want to lash out or turn inward.
- We need each other in the midst of a scary world to help each other come closer to the perfect love which casts out fear – which Jesus calls us to – but which is just too much for any single one of us to embody all by ourselves.

The second thing I learned about this verse is that that word “blessed” or “happy” also has its original language roots in a word that means “going in the right direction.” There are all kinds of directional signs all around us right now and many of them are contradictory. Some counsel to go in the direction of fearfulness. Some counsel to go in the direction of suspiciousness. Some counsel to go in the direction of cynicism in the face of a civic season where it sometimes seems every choice is a poor one. But the direction that God hopes that we will go was indeed stated so long ago in that very first commandment: may we always find ourselves heading in the direction, following the footsteps of a God who is about liberation, a God who wants freedom from fearfulness, a God who was unfailingly present with a people who wandered for forty years in the wilderness and who will be just as present with us as we strive to truly live as if we believe what the angels of God so often have told us in so many ways, “Do not be afraid, do not be afraid.” Shall we go?