

The Great Spiritual Migration, Part 2: The God of Outsiders, Immigrants, and Refugees (1)

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle
P18 Proper 23 Year C October 13, 2019

Scripture: Luke 17:11-19;
2 Kings 5:1-3, 7-15c; 2 Tim. 2:8-15

Sermon: (*Preach from down front at the small table brought to the center*)

Last Sunday we learned that there's been a Great Spiritual Migration from Faith as a set of Beliefs to Faith as Trust in a relationship with God. Today we ponder the second of three great spiritual migrations taking place in the Christian journey.

Consider St. John's definitive statement about God for Christians as found in the 1st Letter of John: "*God is love.*" (4:8, 16)

Short and sweet. "*God is love.*" But how does that square with the alleged words and actions of God elsewhere in the Scriptures? There is this direct command from God, for example, in Deuteronomy chapter 7: "*When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you..., then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.*" (7:1-2) Here God basically commands genocide. Genocide?! Let that settle in for a moment. How do we square this with, *God is Love*?"

It depends on our reading strategy of the Bible. Sadly, many Christians aren't even aware that there are various strategies for reading the Bible. By strategy, I mean: how do you view the meaning or truth in a text? You wouldn't, for example, read a biography of Abraham Lincoln with the same strategy as the Harry Potter series of children's books: one is mostly factual, the other is all fiction.

But many Christians have assumed only one strategy for reading the Bible: namely, that all statements in the Bible are literally and equally true. I call this having a "Flat Bible" (*Demonstrate on the table in front of the church.*) And that's precisely the strategy that presents us with problems like squaring these two statements about God. If we read 1st John chapter 4 and Deuteronomy chapter 7 as both literally and equally true, then God somehow is both love and someone who commands genocide. God becomes a two-faced god, a Janis faced god: one face loving, the other face wrathful. We've been worshipping the two-faced, pagan, Roman god Janis in American civil religion, not Jesus. We must get back to Jesus.

Most regrettable have been the historical consequences of this misuse of the Bible: it's meant we Christians have been able to keep a genocide card in our back pockets, (*pull out my wallet and take out a genocide card*) to pull out whenever it's been convenient for us to slaughter an enemy. For example, when our Christian European ancestors came to this continent 400 years ago, they pulled the genocide card out of their pockets and cleared away this land, just like the people of Israel did under Moses and Joshua. Our ancestors used passages like Deuteronomy chapter 7 to justify the murder of the native peoples of this land. (3)

I believe that our history makes it clear that we need to consider a new reading strategy for the Bible that doesn't allow for a God who can justify our human violence. I propose that we finally make the great spiritual migration into a new experience of God as Love, simply Love, a spiritual migration that Jesus not only launched but incarnated. Jesus, we proclaim, is God's love... in the flesh. In other words, God himself has made the decisive move to finally help us know who God truly is: Love, period, end of story.

Except it's not the end of the story yet, because we human beings are so slow on the uptake. We're happy with the gods we've created that allow us to kill and torture and mistreat our enemies instead of love them, and so we're slow to journey to the place of God as love only. So by "great spiritual migration" I mean that God himself, like the Pied Piper, is taking us on a long journey from our own false ideas about who God is into the complete knowledge revealed in Jesus Christ: "*God is love.*"

I say it like this: if it doesn't sound like Jesus,.. if it doesn't look like Jesus,.. then it cannot be God. Even if the Bible says that God commanded genocide and all sorts of violence, well, it can't be the loving Abba we know in our Lord Jesus Christ. For me, it must be that the human writers of the Bible were projecting their own violence onto God to justify their bad behavior. Instead of saying "The devil made me do it" for those of us who remember the comedian Flip Wilson, we say "God made me do it."

This migration also means a new reading strategy for the Bible, precisely as a migration! We're to read the Bible from the perspective of God taking human beings on a long journey, many centuries long so far, with many advances and retreats. We can expect to find false ideas about God persisting along the way, even in the Bible, Deuteronomy chapter 7 being one of many examples. This sin of idolatry in the Bible shouldn't shock us if we're willing to confess our own Christian history of the same sin of justifying violence in God's name. As the late Jerry Falwell once said in reference to Islamist terrorists, "Blow them all away in the name of the Lord." God as love has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ and we've continued the sin of violence in our own Christian history. We still don't

have this thing of God as love completely right. Sadly, we Christians have a mixed record at best on loving our enemies.

Here's the matter in a nutshell. We've evolved with a largely false idea of who God is. We might call this idea the "God's-on-our-side" view. This is the God created in each human community and culture which helps cement the cultural identity. Example: most cultures, until now, have said that men have a higher place than women, because, clearly, God made us men superior. Right, ladies? Ha. That's what we're calling "God's-on-our-side" — in this case, on the side of men, who had taken charge and justified it with God's-on-our-side. This God's-on-our-side defines who our group is over against those Others, protecting us from them and hopefully giving us victory over them. God's-on-our-side is the God who sometimes commands genocide.

I'm proposing to you today that the biblical story is one of God taking us on a journey away from God's-on-our-side to God-is-love. (4) The God who created the entire universe, including all women as well as men, doesn't take sides. (5) God-is-love is a God beyond any one of our human cultures who came to fulfill all our law-based cultures in love. In Jesus the Messiah, God shows us how to love, even loving our enemies, as the only way to ultimately live in peace.

But how can God overcome the God's -on-our-side version of God, which we've come to rely on so much? Put yourself in God's shoes for a moment. If you're the true God, how would you get through to us humans that you as Creator don't take sides? That you are Love and never the willful violence of human beings? How would you get through? It wouldn't be easy to go against 100,000 years of evolution. It'd take a long time, hopefully, not another 100,000 years, but a long time, nevertheless. (6)

Here's how I think God broke through our idolatries,... by identifying with the outsiders, immigrants, and refugees, in order to show us God's-on-everyone's-side, not just ours. God needed to identify with the marginalized and oppressed in our own cultures. And when you take a look at the biblical story as a whole, doesn't this begin to make sense? Let's take a quick whirlwind tour with this new reading strategy of God-is-on-everyone's-side:

- Abraham and Sarah were called out from their culture to be perpetual wanderers (Genesis ch. 12)
- The Hebrew slaves in Egypt were called out to be wanderers in the desert (Exodus)
- Then, when, against God's advice, God's chosen people insisted on having kings and a kingdom of their own, just like all of their pagan neighbors. God sent prophets to remind them of the outsiders and the oppressed, which they once were.

- When Jesus arrives as the crucified Messiah, the people of Israel had been perpetual outsiders to other people's empires for centuries. Their hopes were for a Messiah who would fulfill the God's-on-our-side by crushing their enemies, the evil Romans. Instead, they get a Messiah who fulfills the God as outsider, immigrant, and refugee. In Jesus, we get God making it clear to us that when we want to find God, we should always look first to the outsider, the oppressed, and the poor. (The 4 Gospels)
- This brings us to today's readings: Elisha helping a foreign, enemy general; Paul, a political prisoner; Jesus heals marginalized lepers, and it's only the foreigner who returns to give thanks.

Here's the deeper meaning of today's Gospel Reading. The healing of the Samaritan leper means more than healing ten people of a terrible disease, as wonderful as that is. Jesus came to heal more than a blind person here, a crippled person there. Jesus came to heal all of humanity from our diseased way of religions which praise the God's-on-our-side, the "Got Mit Uns" on the belt buckles of the German soldiers of WW I, or the arrogant attitude of American exceptionalism. Jesus came to heal all of us of our warring violence so that we might begin to hope for a day of peace.

The Bible, in other words, is one, long, long story of our healing. And it continues! The promise is that when we extend that love to outsiders, we open ourselves to meeting God in powerful ways. So, in the meantime, we return each week to this table to be healed. We follow the Samaritan leper in returning here each week to give praise and thanks to God! And then we're sent out with that healing love to a deeply hurting world in need of a Good News message of hope and healing.

Amen?!

Sources:

The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Nuechterlein
 Delivered at Faith Lutheran,
 Saginaw, MI, October 8-9, 2016

Notes

1. This sermon is based on the second of three spiritual migrations in **Brian McLaren's** book [The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion Is Seeking a Better Way to Be Christian](#). (We explored the [first of three last Sunday](#) and the [third next Sunday](#).) I highly recommend this book for all! It is the essential guide to being better Christians for the sake of the world. This sermon draws on Part 2 of the book, the second of three great spiritual migrations that he elaborates.

2. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, chapter 4, “The Genocide Card in Your Back Pocket.” McLaren does a superb job of raising awareness for the White Christian Supremacy that has been justified by this reading strategy. Chapter 6, “The Bible in Labor,” points the way to a different reading strategy.

3. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, chapter 5, “God 5.0,” makes this basic move using different language. He argues that our experience of God needs to migrate beyond what I’m calling “God-on-our-side,” which he calls “God 4.0.”

4. Matthew 5:44-45: *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*”

5. Raising these questions in this manner is where the anthropological perspective as represented by the Mimetic Theory of [René Girard](#) has been crucial for my own perspective. My reading strategy of Scripture has become anthropological — seeing the Bible as the story of God’s long journey with us into becoming truly human.