

October 9, 2011: YOU'RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME

Matthew 22:1-14; Exodus 32:1-14; Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23

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Possessive pronouns reveal so much. Perhaps you have overheard parents discussing their child, knowing that when the child in question is referred to as “*your* child,” things can’t be going well. Whereas “*our* child” reflects conduct worthy of their mutual pride. When God breaks the news to Moses that the people are worshiping a golden calf, it’s all “*your* people,” until Moses reminds God of his role in the matter and that the Egyptians could get the wrong impression if God destroyed Israel. What Moses does is to call God back into character, into being who God really is. This story is often used to prove that the God of the Old Testament is an angry God. Creepy as that notion is, there is some truth to it. In his book, *Love Wins*, Rob Bell wonders about the missional logic of asserting a God who loves us so much that God is willing to die for us, and who will send to eternal torment in hell those who won’t believe that.

Scholar Abraham Heschel writes that, a child who feels unloved and abandoned by the parent will be hurt. But, he says, the parent *who does not love* is hurt more. Many parents weathering a child’s transition through adolescence will feel their love is not reciprocated. Some, in the thick of that transition, may even believe their love isn’t received. If Heschel is right, an unloving *parent* hurts more. This is what Moses appeals to in God. He reminds God, “You *must* love your people or you will experience more pain than if, as is now happening, you loved them and they didn’t return your love.” That’s quite a statement about loyalty and character. The parent of a two-year-old might say sweetly, “Don’t run in the street,” but when the kid makes a dash for the street, the parental reaction will be loud and swift and even angry. God has just told Israel, “Don’t make any idols, especially ones like animals.” The divine wrath is not an emotional response. This is about God’s sovereignty and righteousness. God is motivated by concern for right and wrong¹ and God’s wrath in scripture always means an end to indifference. Indifference is more insidious than the evil.

Jesus tells the story of a king who is angry at being dissed by his guests and so invites substitutes. The story is Jesus’ “You’re not the boss of me!” response to critics who ask, “Who died and *made* you God?” It begins with a typical first-century “double invitation”—the first to “save the date,” the second so guests know who else is invited. Their trivial excuses signal their disapproval of the host’s plans, so the king gets angry over the slam to his honor. But even at the newly-constituted party, there is a guest who will not receive his hospitality. Robes were provided by the host, so to refuse to put one on is akin to writing insults about the hostess in lipstick on the guestroom mirror.

There are appropriate times for anger. Which reminds me of a family I knew in Wisconsin. The name “Dilley” in certain circles was always associated

¹ Abraham J Heschel, *The Prophets*, Vol 2, “The Meaning and Mystery of Wrath.”

with cement finishers. Emil, who started it all, came to this country as a child before World War 1. During the war, his family Anglicized their name to escape anti-German sentiment, but Emil could not so easily shed his German-Lutheran male stoicism. Emil married and had a big family which included two boys. Ferociously proud of his children, he raised them in the conservative branch of the Lutheran church to value hard work and clean-living. Above all else, family loyalty was the highest good. This translated, for the boys, to an iron-clad expectation that they would enter his trade and serve as apprentices under him.

I knew both “boys,” Zell and Dewey, when they were in their 60s, working for my family’s business. They ate lunch in the job shack with me, so I got to hear a lot of Emil stories. Zell would begin with, “I thought my father hated me,” and Dewey would interrupt with, “Aw, Zell, he thought *you* hated *him!*” They must have re-told these stories a thousand times. They would carry on about Zell going out drinking and how mad their father would get and make threats about what apprenticeship would be like, so Zell ran away when he was still in high school. Zell disappeared for a year after that, which just about gave Emil apoplexy, he was so angry. Dewey stayed home and tried to soothe their dad. When World War 2 broke out, both boys enlisted and the girls went to the shipyards to work. Emil grieved every minute of the war, because of his children’s absence, and when they all came home at the end—even Zell—he was so happy he almost showed it.

The post-war building boom gave them a chance to do what Emil had always promised the boys. They learned his trade and lived into his dream for them. “It was the war that helped me see how much he loved us,” Dewey would say. Zell would agree, but he’d usually add, “It’s not like he ever *showed* it!” Then they’d go off on some pointed rant about their father’s rages when they were late for work or didn’t meet his standards for workmanship. Sometimes they’d add half-jokingly, “I never knew he loved us until he was dying and he actually *said* something.”

One day the well-worn Dilley family litany was interrupted by the ironworker foreman, Jim. He was taking soup out of his noon-time crockpot. “You know what’s worse?” he asked, as all eyes turned to him. Jim cooked lunch in the trailer, because he followed the jobs around the state, and hot lunch was the closest he’d get to home until the weekend. “What’s worse,” he said “is a father who *can’t* love. A father whose love is rejected, it’s like you put a stopper on his love, but it’s still there. A father who’s angry is at least a father who cares. A father who can’t love may as well be dead.”

The trailer was silent while everyone waited to hear what else Jim had to say. “When a parent is angry over a kid rejecting everything he values as good and true, that anger means grief over a wasted life, it means love that wants the best for the child.” We had heard about Emil’s standards and rules and his expectations from his kids for years, so this made sense. But we hadn’t thought

about what “no love” was like. “When parents don’t care,” he continued, “they don’t bother wasting emotion, unless they’ve experienced some sort of personal inconvenience.” Ouch. That seemed cynical, but from the way people’s eyes shifted around the trailer, I knew we were privately remembering examples of parents who didn’t seem to care about their kids one way or the other, kids who never had consequences for their wild behavior or whose parents only got mad when their drinking or the game on TV were interrupted.

Friends, God’s wrath, like Emil’s toward his wayward son, God’s wrath expresses God’s deep and abiding love for us. Instead of destroying the disobedient Israelites, God listens to a human who has the *chutzpah* to bring to mind God’s own character. God *cannot* be unfaithful to who God is, just as Emil could only be who he was. As the Meditation before Worship says (Heschel again), love is God’s nature, but so is justice. Since justice is God’s nature, for God to disregard our evil deeds would be unfaithful to God’s nature. God limits rightful divine justice and tempers it with mercy, but Divine anger expresses both love and justice. “It is divine anger that gives strength to [both] God’s truth and justice.” Only God loves us enough to be able to require us to grow up into who we were created to be.

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