

“God’s Work in Us”

Dave Ussery (Christian Century) wonders if God is using his iPod to communicate to him. An iPod, for those who don’t know, is a small digital device that stores and plays music. It has an incredible capacity for memory. For example, Dave’s iPod has 9,073 songs on it. Yet, when he hits the random play button, it seems to have an uncanny ability to play the song that he needs to hear. This happens so regularly that he wonders, is this just chance or could there be some larger purpose at work? Is it crazy to think that God could use the random play button on a digital device to communicate to someone? David Bartholomew, professor of statistics, doesn’t think so. In his book *God, Chance, and Purpose*, he argues that “chance is a real part of nature and is not necessarily the enemy of purpose; in fact, chance can be thought of as an integral part of God’s creation.” In other words, chance and purpose are not necessarily opposites. Nor, I might be quick to add, are they necessarily always easily correlated.

After Katrina, a number of well known evangelists claimed that the hurricane was God’s way of punishing the citizens of New Orleans for their permissive attitude. Yet when a recent hurricane spared that same area, none of these evangelists came out declaring this as a sign of God’s favor. What kind of message do we send about the God we believe in when we play fast and loose with the connections between chance and purpose, I wonder? Perhaps it is reactions like these that create an atmosphere where the majority of people who believe in God, believe that God’s intervention in creation is sporadic at best, perhaps even confined to a period of time we refer to as biblical times.

One commentator puts it this way: “We are always looking to close the canon on God’s mission in the world. We want all of our revelation in the past tense, behind us where we can look at it. We want a God who can be sent to the taxidermist and then proudly mounted on the wall” (Christian Century, Living by the Word). But the Bible itself proclaims a different picture of God. It witnesses to a God that is alive, active and at work in the world. Moreover, according to the biblical witness, the people of so-called biblical times, people like the members of the community at Philippi, didn’t think for one moment God’s activity would stop with them. In fact, they believed it would increase.

But how, when and why God acts in and through creation is a bit of a mystery. This is probably the one of the biggest, if not the biggest, stumbling block for thinking people who are inclined to believe in God. If God exists, where is God? Why is God not more evident? These are good questions with which we must struggle as people of faith. They have no pat answers. And, in fact, we should be very weary of anyone who tells us otherwise.

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Ten days after his son, Alex, was killed in a car accident, Reverend William Sloane Coffin entered the pulpit at Riverside Church in New York City where he was pastor at the time. From it he said, “When a person dies, there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said. The night after Alex died I was sitting in the living room of my sister's house outside of Boston, when the front door opened and in came a nice-looking, middle-aged woman, carrying about eighteen quiches. When she saw me, she shook her head, then headed for the kitchen, saying sadly over her shoulder, ‘I just don't understand the

will of God.' Instantly I was up and in hot pursuit, swarming all over her. 'I'll say you don't, lady!' I said. For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels...The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is 'It is the will of God.' Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break."

The reason I share this with you this morning is not only because it is a powerful example of a man of faith faced a personal tragedy, but because it is also a stark reminder that one of the most important tensions we must come to terms with in our own faith journey is that between power and love. We need to ask ourselves, is God more interested in controlling us or loving us?

In today's scripture lesson Paul provides us with some things to think about as we face that tension. If we look at Jesus, Paul writes, we see a God who is willing to be humbled, to empty himself, to submit himself even to death for the sake of the other. This is not an image of God as divine dictator, not one who needs to punish people for their sin, but one of a God whose love is so deep, that the risk of vulnerability is a natural extension of God's very being. And perhaps just as important as his words is the context in which Paul is making this argument. This is not some theological debate or philosophical teaching. He is writing to the community of faith who is struggling to follow in the way Jesus revealed to them. In other words, this is not some idea to which we need to give our intellectual assent. It is a way of life, the truth of which can only be experienced.

Paul also has some strong words for those who are so eager to declare that God is sitting in judgment over others: work out *your own* salvation with fear and trembling. Paul tells us that God is at work in each of us, enabling us both to will and to work for God's good pleasure. If we want evidence of God's work in the world, we don't need to look at world events or natural disasters. The proper question is not so much, is God using my iPod to speak to me? Rather it is, is God at work in me as I listen to my iPod, as I allow the music to speak to me, as I look at the world and try to make sense of it, as I try to find patterns in the chaos? We need to look, not so much outwardly, as to our inward selves. We need to ask what moves us and concerns us? Where is it that we feel loved? Where do we need to be loved or forgiven? Are we able to reflect through our own lives the love that Jesus showed? Are we able to regard others as better than ourselves?

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Over the next few months we will be talking quite a bit about the future of this congregation. We will be talking about how God might be speaking to us and where God might be calling us. We will also be talking about how we may need to change in order to be ready to respond. This is not to discount the wonderful history of this congregation. It is to make sure that the congregation can continue its legacy of seeking to serve God into the future. The generations that have gone before us had to do the same thing. Otherwise we wouldn't be here today. Staying still and holding onto what we have been is never an option for a community of people who worship and serve a living God.

But beyond the temptation to simply hold on to what was, is the even more dangerous temptation that this task can be accomplished without each and every one of us. It would be a mistake to think that this is the work of the pastor, or the staff, or the session alone. The truth is that if there is to be any transformation of RPPC, it has to begin within each and every one of us. We must take seriously our call to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. You see, it's not so much about organization, programs or buildings, as it is about the God who is at work in each of us, enabling us to both will and work for God's good pleasure. Because to believe or even assume that God is living and active in our world is to believe that God is not finished working on any of us just yet!

Let us pray: God we thank you for the word we have received from you in Jesus Christ, for the assurance that you are with us and the challenge that you call us to be where you are at work in the world. Give us such faith as not to look to others or sit in judgment of what may or may not have been, but to trust you enough to see that you are at work in and through each one of us, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.