

### **Is Our God Too Small?**

In his most recent book, Peter Gomes, Minister of Harvard's Memorial Church offers this account: "Not long ago, I found myself on a panel with Rick Warren, author of the fabulous book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. We were each asked a variety of questions, and our secular interrogators harped on the question of whether anyone can be saved who is not a born-again Christian. Rick's answer was as generous as his theology would allow, but the crux of the matter for him were the words in John's Gospel, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no man cometh unto the Father but by me.' He then threw the smoldering potato over to me, and I responded that I could not imagine that the God who is the creator of all has no plan of salvation for the billions of others in this world who are not Christians. Romans tells us that he certainly has not forgotten the Jews. 'So,' I said to my friend Rick, 'I can only conclude that my God is bigger than yours.'"<sup>1</sup>

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Gomes is speaking here with tongue in cheek. Of course, he does not really mean that his God is bigger than Warren's. Yet, in relaying this interaction he helps us to see our tendency to project our own limits onto God, and furthermore to automatically elevate our own belief system over that of others. The obvious case of this in today's Gospel lesson is that of the Pharisees who are upset by the company Jesus is keeping. It is not because they believe him to be the son of God

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<sup>1</sup> *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007) pp 40-41.

that they are upset, nor is it simply because he is a Jew and he is associating so freely with those who openly violate the Jewish laws; it is because Jesus presumes to know something of God that they do not. They have studied the Torah. They know it word for word and follow it to the letter. As far as they are concerned, no one can teach them anything new about God, especially not one who openly associates with those who violate God's law. But before we get to harsh on the Pharisees shrinking God down to their limits, we need to recognize how often we too fall into the same trap as they do. Part of faith is realizing that God is much bigger than we recognize.

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Anglican bishop N.T. Wright tells the story<sup>2</sup> of a collector who finds a faded manuscript of music. The collector calls a friend who is a musician. When he sees the manuscript his eyes light up for the handwriting is Mozart's. But then he seems confused, so the collector asks what he is thinking. "Well it looks like Mozart, but I am not familiar with the piece." So they sit down at a piano and he begins to play it. It begins beautifully and sounds like just the sort of thing Mozart would have composed, but then as he continues to play there are places where not much happens. The piano is simply keeping time and further along there are periods of rest. And it begins to dawn on them that what they have found is indeed a previously undiscovered Mozart piece, but piano accompaniment. The other parts are no where to be found and there is now way they can be recreated. So while what they have is quite remarkable it is also

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<sup>2</sup> His version of this story can be found in his book *Simply Christian* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006) pp. 39-40.

frustratingly incomplete. The piano music only makes sense when its incompleteness is acknowledged. Likewise, our faith only makes sense when we come to realize that, as the Paul so beautifully puts, we see only in part.

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To what degree do we project our own limits, our limited understanding, even our pious attempts at orthodoxy, onto the Creator? We have such a strong tendency to remake God in our own image, to reduce God to our something we can grasp, to relegate God to be the God of only a certain people, to believe the good news is only good news for us if its bad news for someone else.

It is easy for us to see how people of other faith's, how their belief systems, their orthodoxies and pieties make a mockery of the God of the universe. It is much more difficult to recognize how our own sense of orthodoxy and piety does the same. You'll notice that immediately following his run in with the Pharisees are two stories of Jesus miraculous healing. At first glance these events would seem to indicate the amazing power of God at work through Jesus. However, when we begin to compare and contrast the two we begin to get a sense of an even deeper meaning here. It all begins when one of the leaders of the synagogue whose daughter has just died comes to Jesus in grief and desperation. While there is no indication that this particular leader was one of the ones complaining about Jesus' behavior earlier in the passage, it is nonetheless remarkable how little this man cares about any of that when in the midst of a situation that has made his own need of grace so apparent.

And just as Matthew the tax collector, who was all too aware of his need of grace, heard the call to follow Jesus and so got up and followed, Jesus hears of

this man's need and so he gets up to see what he can do to help out. If we were cynical we might try to make a case here for how this man was able to get Jesus' attention so readily because he was in a position of power and influence, but then on the way Jesus encounters another woman in need of healing. The Gospel writer reports that this woman has been suffering from hemorrhages for 12 years. It is not a matter of literary imagination that Matthew knows the numbers of years she has been suffering. This is someone that the community of faith has been put on notice about: she is an outcast. And so we have two people at two different ends of the social and religious spectrum asking Jesus for his attention and mercy and both receive both.

In the end that is what it is about. It is not about comparing belief systems and deciding which is right or wrong. It is about not allowing our systems to restrict what we can expect of our God. Gomes writes, "When a Christian says, as the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention once said, that 'God does not hear the prayers of Jews,' then I know that, at the least, that person has an inadequate doctrine of God...Such a God is parochial, provincial, and unworthy of the praises directed toward him; only God, who does provide for everybody, even in ways unknown or unclear to Christians, is a God who deserves the title 'Creator of the World.' Just because you and I cannot account for the religions of other people does not mean that the God whom we worship cannot."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gomes, pp. 154 -155.

Please do not misunderstand me. The main point here is not simply that we must respect the belief systems of others, although that message certainly could be derived from the larger point, which is how small we make God seem when we speak of God as an immense version of ourselves. If that is our image of God, explicitly or implicitly, then the Gospel may not always strike us as good news.

For example, later in the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells another parable that highlights how uncomfortable we can be with God's generosity to others, especially those we deem unworthy. It is the parables of the workers in the field where you may recall the owner pays the workers who show up at the end of the day and do a fraction of a days work the same wage as those who worked all day long. When those who worked in the owner's field all day long complain to the owner, the response is "Do you begrudge me my generosity?"

This is the tougher side of the Gospel. It is the good news that is hard to swallow; the word that disturbs and challenges us; that bids us to ask: have we fully accounted for God's generosity for ourselves and others? Or are we too caught up in pointing out another's need for grace that we have forgotten our own? To all of these thoughts and questions Jesus response is, "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'"

*Let us pray: God who is creator of all, give us faith to see something of your greatness and generosity, give us humility to recognize how partial our understanding of you is, and when our pride or prejudice takes over, call us back to the humble faith we learn from Jesus. Give us courage to follow his example in reaching out to those who need your grace, and in so doing, help us to recognize and openly accept our own need for you and each other. Amen.*