

The Art of God's Deal

July 28, 2019

The Rev. Mary Strong was worried. Her congregation, Forest Hills United Church of Christ, was struggling. She wasn't sure they'd make it. Like many churches, hers took a hit in the 2009 recession—some people couldn't give, or thought they couldn't, so they stopped. They hadn't restarted. Then, her congregation voted to be Open and Affirming—and a few more disgruntled folks left. Mary wasn't too sad about that—the ones who left by and large had sapped her energy and took an inordinate amount of attention, anyway. Pastors aren't supposed to admit that they ever are happy when people leave, but the fact of the matter is that some sour grapes truly can spoil the whole bunch. Still, it had been a rough decade. On a good Sunday 75 would show up; on a bad Sunday, it could be 40. And let's just say the demographics weren't headed in the right direction: there were more funerals every year than there were new members.

It was Mary's first call. Seminary hadn't prepared her well. In her first year, the furnace gave out, the roof sprung a leak, and the accountant quit. The custodian filed for workers compensation. None of these contingencies had ever been covered in her Bible, or Theology, or Preaching classes. She felt over her head more or less on a daily basis, and she lived in dread of failing to attend properly to her emails, or voice messages, or text messages, or of missing a meeting—even though she was by all accounts competent and she worked hard.

And she loved what she was doing. She felt increasingly confident as a preacher. She'd just wrapped up a series of sermons on the Lord's Prayer. The first Sunday her title was "The Hallowed Name of God, our Mother." After that sermon, one of her congregants, Rose, came up to her and said: "I know God isn't a boy, or a girl, or neither, or both, but I just grew up saying "He, Him, His" all the time—and now I can't break that habit. It's like I'm stuck in a rut, theologically." Mary nodded—she'd been in the same place once. "It's amazing," Mary said, "how powerful language can be; it's the richest source of idols we have, and the deepest source of violence." She and Rose continued to talk about what it meant to practice imagining God as female. She suggested that Rose meditate on, simply repeat over and over, those biblical images of God as a mother hen, or a woman looking for a lost coin, or a powerful source of life who gave birth to creation. "To hallow God's name," she had preached, "means to recognize that God is God, and to let God be God. A lot of problems fall away when we stop trying to control God through our language—and when we experiment with the rich female metaphors for God in Scripture (and from our experience). Try it! Every time you imagine God as male, try complimenting that imagination with an image of God as female. We hallow God's name when we don't get stuck in just one way of naming God—because God is, of course, beyond any name we can imagine. That's why our Jewish sisters and brothers won't even utter the revealed name of God, the I am that I am, or I will be who I will be, or I was what I was—you name it! Getting stuck in one image is basically the definition of idolatry. And you can be sure," Mary went on, "that God is NOT a white male with blue eyes (not that there's anything wrong with white males with blue eyes!)"

Then, Pastor Mary preached in her second week on “Jesus’ Radical Kingdom.” Jesus was unlike any kind of king in history, she said. He wasn’t into monarchical power—you know, he wasn’t into hierarchy. Jesus’ vision of power was shared power. That’s why so many people found healing through him: he empowered others. And that’s as radical today as it was then. Imagine a leader with a total lack of ego. When you meet her, there’s real presence in her attention—no calculation, no scheming, no vested interest: just presence. That would be radical, wouldn’t it? And then Mary went on: “A leader with a total lack of ego is truly hard to imagine, given the way some leaders behave, these days.”

And Mary got some push back for that last line. One of her congregants who supported the current President, and who happened to be one of the bigger donors in the church, came up to shake her hand after the service and said: “You made Jesus sound like a socialist.” “Well,” Mary explained, after taking a deep breath and trying not to sound defensive: “Jesus did say, and we pray every Sunday, that God will forgive our sins, as we forgive our debtors. Is that socialist?” The man muttered something under his breath—Mary only heard the word “communist,” as he walked away. Mary didn’t say to him, but she could have, that people living under the Roman empire and especially in a colonial outpost like Palestine were riddled with debt. Rich landowners gave loans to their workers that they then charged exorbitant interest on. People were crushed by this debt. So, to pray “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” as Jesus taught his followers, was definitely to signal that he sided with the poor, which was (and is) a radical reversal of the usual way of doing things. Jesus wasn’t a socialist—since socialism didn’t exist in the 1st century AD, but he surely wasn’t a capitalist, either.

Week Three of Mary’s series on The Lord’s Prayer was on “our daily bread.” Mary talked about a film she had seen in seminary, entitled “Our Daily Bread,” made in 1934 by King Vidor. It **was** a socialist film. It described the emergence and struggles of a communal farm—like the farms and factories that spread throughout the U.S. as employee-owned operations in the 1930s-to now. Those kind of businesses provide workers a living wage—AND give workers the satisfaction of meaningful and shared labor. The film was hardly a classic. But it did point to what Jesus meant when he encouraged people to pray “give us this day our daily bread.” We’re better, happier, more at peace, Mary preached, when we live by what Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, called a “theology of enough.” Our daily bread is enough. And there’s always more, it seems, when we ourselves live gratefully. When we share, whether we’re talking about real bread or about money or about time and talents, we find out that sharing is its own reward. A sharing economy is a living economy; focused less on accumulation and more on sustainability and the common good.

Surprisingly, Mary heard no complaints after that sermon. Nobody had seen the movie, and the guy who had thought she made Jesus sound like a socialist the week before wasn’t there. She was, honestly, happy about that—even though pastors aren’t supposed to be happy when people don’t show up for church.

And Week Four Mary preached on “A Time of Trial.” That word “trial,” in Greek, Mary explained—was *peirasmon*, which also gets translated as “test” or “temptation.” It appears 21 times in the New Testament. It’s used not only by Jesus in the gospels, but also by Paul and the other New Testament writers. And the kind of trial it refers to, Mary went on, isn’t only how we usually think of temptation or trial—like a temptation to do some wicked act or the trial of being persecuted or in a courtroom accused of some crime. Usually, what Jesus means by a time of trial is a time of dullness, torpor, boredom, or lack of attention. The opposite of being in a time of trial, as Jesus refers to it, is a time of being AWAKE. God wants us woke, Mary preached. God wants us to live fully—to be awake to the opportunities and gifts life gives us; to be awake to the suffering of others around us, including the suffering of the planet. So—save us from the time of trial means—save us from boredom; save us from getting stuck in a rut; save us from doing things the same old way just because that’s the way we’ve always done them. God the Creator wants us to be creative, too. When we create, we participate in God’s own creativity.

Nobody complained about that sermon, either—which made Mary wonder how many of them had stayed awake during it.

But now Mary was struggling over her sermon for this Sunday. The Hebrew Bible text appointed in the lectionary was Genesis 18—the story of Sodom and Gomorrah—and the lead up to the destruction of those cities. So much damage had been done with the interpretation of that story that Mary didn’t want to repeat it. Mary knew what the archaeological record showed...that the ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah had been destroyed in war. In the ancient world, war was always total war—which meant that the cities were leveled by fire, and the stones of buildings scattered and shattered. And Mary knew from the text that Sodom and Gomorrah’s “sin” was inhospitality—they didn’t welcome strangers, and indeed—were violent to them. AND Mary loved the way Abraham bargained with God in the lead-up to the story: “Then Abraham came near to God and said, “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it?” And Mary loved Abraham’s persistence—he made a deal with God to get that number down to ten—just ten righteous to forgive the cities and preserve them.

But the problem in the story is that God still could seem arbitrary and destructive—and she knew that wasn’t actually how God is. So here’s what Mary preached: “What our story for today from the Book of Genesis shows us is a God of mercy who nevertheless demands justice and who will not intervene when we are on a destructive path. Our story shows us the art of God’s deal, she preached—tongue firmly in cheek. That deal is clear, she said. Destruction produces its own effects. Lying and inhospitality and violence destroy. War destroys. Indeed, the human capacity to destroy is nearly endless. We have studied war too well.

Yet God does not desire destruction, but *always* will side with love. Indeed, Mary said, we need to constantly remind ourselves that the God with whom we deal not only

practices love, but God IS love. Jesus makes this plain. There is no deal that God won't make—when we ask. There is no deal that God won't accept—when we love. There is no deal that God won't welcome—when it is just.

The art of God's deal is the art of where justice and mercy combine. This is a win-win deal for sure, Mary preached. God is happy when we are happy and at peace! All of the power is on God's side—who are we to deal with the ultimate power in the universe? And yet as with Abraham, God invites us to participate in God's own creativity and mercy and justice and love. Imagine winning the lottery, Mary spun out the implications for her congregation, a lottery that gives you infinite money—that's what God's love is like. Infinite. We can't even comprehend it, can we? And yet that's the truth. God is always ready to forgive; we merely need to ask. God is always there; we merely need to come near. God is always ready to love; and why wouldn't we love in return?

God won't stop a spiral into violence that is humanly generated because to do so would erode the capacity of people to choose the good—to choose love—to choose life. And isn't that the point of living, to really live—to recognize the GIFT of life and to cherish it?

And isn't that kind of what heaven must be like—to live the life one has chosen, and to love it!?

So that's what Pastor Mary Strong preached to her people on the 7th Sunday after Pentecost. She hoped they would hear in her words the grace of a loving God. She hoped they'd welcome any strangers who might be in their midst on that particular Sunday. And she hoped that her people—that people everywhere, for that matter, would turn away from any path of violence or destruction they might be on. The art of God's deal is for us to study war no more. The art of God's deal is to create a word filled with amazing grace. May it be so. Amen.

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