

God Shaped Healing

September 4, 2022

We're Worthy!

Since the creation of the cinema, every generation seems to have its iconic movies, whose scenes from the big screen everyone can quote, and which seem to get in your head and refuse to leave. I apologize to you in advance that, for my generation, one of those movies is the 1992 Mike Myers and Dana Carvey classic, "Wayne's World." The premise is that Myers and Carvey play Wayne and Garth who are two geeky young adults who host a public access TV show from Wayne's parents' basement. Among other ridiculous running jokes, every time they encounter someone they admire, they fall down on their knees and bow to them, repeating, "We're not worthy! We're not worthy!"

This idea that we're not worthy is steeped into Christian culture since the Reformation. All of the Reformers had some take on the idea that humans are inferior and unworthy, and it is only through God's magnificence and magnanimity that we will have any sort of meaningful life in this world and that to come.

Now, here's the thing, friends: that's just bad psychology. While it does neatly explain why there is so much suffering in the world, and does neatly set up our need for God, a theology built on human depravity roots us in soil that isn't nourishing. For some, this notion that we could never possibly be worthy manifests itself as anxiety, depression, and other debilitating mental health concerns. For others, building on the foundation of unworthiness manifests as shame, cynicism, and even despair. If we don't see the possibility of healing, of being better, we will remain in a deficit mindset.

Perhaps the most iconic American example of this is the 18th century sermon by Johnathan Edwards, "Sinners In the Hands of An Angry God," in which Edwards describes humans as inherently wicked, and our only hope is to be subsumed in the grace of Christ. Again, this does neatly set up our need for God, but the change that it motivates isn't genuine or sustainable. Change that is built on fear isn't real. It's a reaction, not a transformation. Quite frankly, when we plant our flag in the notion that we are inherently awful, the way we treat both ourselves and others is inevitably skewed.

Our Scriptures

Now, I know I'm knocking the legs out from under a lot of what people have been taught in the past. I know that, for some, this idea that we're not worthy is foundational to their understanding of the faith and their relationship with God. But friends, I would remind you that all of our understanding of God, of the Divine, and of our relationship with the Divine is metaphor, as St. Paul says, "now, we see through a glass darkly, but in the future we will see clearly."

Our scripture passage from the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah today gives us the image of God as a potter. The image is that a clay vessel becomes misshapen, and so the potter reworks it into something good. In this image, the vessel doesn't start out bad. The clay is neutral. It becomes misshapen, and the divine hand corrects it. This gives us a very different, scriptural, notion of our foundation and relationship with God than that of the inherent unworthiness of human beings. Rather than being inherently awful, in this theology, human beings are shaped by what is around them, and are able to be reshaped by God, the divine potter.

A couple of weeks ago, when our Gospel passage was about Jesus healing a woman who had been bent out of shape for 18 years, I offered the image of a phone cord that was stretched to within an inch of its usable life. Today we're invited into that image of being misshapen again. Perhaps today's image is of

the plastic lid that you accidentally put on the lower rack of the dishwasher and which melts and twists into an unusable shape. Or perhaps today's image should be borrowing someone else's shoes. Even if you wear the same size, someone else's shoes never feel right, because they've been shaped by their gait and walking patterns. Or even think of tires on your car. The idea of rotating your tires is that where each tire is placed will result in a different pattern of wear, and by rotating them they will wear more evenly.

In all of these examples, there is an experience that creates the malformation. So, too, I would suggest with human brokenness and sin. Rather than understanding the human condition as inherently unworthy, it is a much psychologically healthier theology to start from a foundation of goodness (or if that's too much of a stretch for you, neutrality) to which, with Divine guidance, we can return.

For those of you who are thinking, "But what about Original Sin," or alternatively, "But what about salvation only by grace," I'll remind you that neither of those are scriptural. Rather, they are human interpretations that meld scripture, tradition, and their creators' worldviews to put forth a notion of how God and faith work. And, just like the misshapen vessel in today's reading, when an idea doesn't serve the people of God well anymore, it deserves to be put back on the potter's wheel and reshaped.

Matthew Fox did that. He's a theologian who actually grew up in Madison with my dad and who went on to substantially reshape the concept of Original Sin. Raised Roman Catholic, he was expelled from that church by retired Pope Benedict. His crime was suggesting that our foundational theology should focus on the parts of the Genesis story in which God pronounces that creation "is good," rather than balancing all of our theology on the way that God punishes Adam and Eve.

Practical Applications

There are two different directions I'd like to take the practical applications of this theology today. For those for whom notions of unworthiness and inherent brokenness have held you in patterns of dis-ease, allow this to be a liberation. Embracing one's inherent worthiness, one's blessedness as a beloved creature of God, has the power to reshape our inner censors and critics and cynics. When we embrace the notion of inherent worthiness in God's eyes, shame, which functions to keep us quiet and small can be reshaped into understanding that it is safe to speak up; our inner censor, which is really a way we seek outside acceptance can be reshaped into being true to oneself rather than seeking to be liked. Our inner cynic, which grows as a barrier to try to keep us from being wounded can be reshaped into an openness to healthy relationality. Along with worthiness, belovedness, and blessedness being a stronger foundation for a healthy psycho—spiritual life, worthiness is also better for us interpersonally and societally.

When we start from the notion that none of us are worthy, it's an easy next step to treating others poorly. Using people, greed, and all of the ways that we're inhumane toward one another can be traced back to our foundational beliefs about humanity.

As we yearn to be shaped by the divine potter rather than malformed by values and forces which are not of God, I'd like to suggest an exercise that could be wonderfully transformative. The idea is to allow God, through this notion of all of our inherent worthiness in God's eyes, to reshape us and our world by building compassion, to invite God to use us as agents of compassion, so that, in turn, our world will be shaped by Divine compassion.

The exercise is to envision being compassionate to five different people. So let's go ahead and give it a mini-trial. Go ahead and get yourself situated a little more comfortably in your seat. Close your eyes if it

would be helpful. The first person we are to envision compassion toward is a benefactor, someone who has given to you significantly over time—maybe a mentor or teacher or someone who has given to you in some way. Envision someone who has been a benefactor to you, and then envision yourself doing an act of compassion toward them. Picture yourself giving them a blessing in return.

The next person to envision is a friend. Choose a friend, and again, envision yourself doing an act of compassion toward them. Picture yourself doing some sort of act of kindness, care, concern, kind heartedness for your friend.

After our friend, the next person to visualize is someone we're neutral about. This may be a neighbor, the clerk at the grocery store, maybe your brother-in-law. Again, picture yourself actively being compassionate toward this neutral person. Envision yourself offering them feeling and consideration and benevolence.

The fourth person to visualize is someone you find difficult—it can be an individual or group of people—a co-worker, a family member, people who voted differently. Here's where it gets tough, and this is why we needed to do the practice with the first three. Envision yourself doing an act of compassion for the difficult person you just brought to mind. Take the time to wrap them in the warmth and sensitivity and soft-heartedness of compassion which you just wrapped the others. Envision an act of compassion you can offer the difficult person.

As if it couldn't get any harder, the last person to envision is yourself. Picture yourself, the ways you're misshapen, your cracks and flaws, and envision yourself doing an act of compassion toward yourself. Envision a kind, merciful, tender-hearted act of compassion toward your brokenness.

Go ahead and open your eyes if you had closed them. It's quite powerful, isn't it, to spend time being shaped by compassion? Again, those people for whom we just visualized compassion were a benefactor, a friend, someone neutral, someone difficult, and ourselves.

Conclusion

Can you imagine the difference in our lives, our community, our world, if each of us spent 10 minutes a day, even 5 minutes, doing that exercise? Can you imagine what the divine potter could do to you, with you, and through you, if for just 10 minutes a day, you practiced being shaped by Christ's compassion?

Friends, Wayne and Garth (and Luther and Calvin and Knox) were wrong. We are worthy. My prayer this week is that we will all have the grace to allow this worthiness to seep into our lives, that we as individuals and a society will be reshaped by grace and compassion and healing and hope.

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