

Sometimes, I Water God

Lake Street Church of Evanston

Rev. Michael Woolf

February 23, 2020

Human beings are complex creatures that have been gifted with the ability to have some astoundingly complex thoughts. The problem begins that most of our reasoning is based on assumptions. Now assumptions are not bad; they help us make good use of the time and energy that we have by giving us shortcuts to thinking, but as we all know that assumptions can be wrong. We can skip over important data by thinking we have all we need to know what's going on. Like, I assumed that folks would be evenly split between White Sox fans and Cubs fans. Seems like a reasonable inference to make, but it doesn't really play out that way north of the city does it? You can assume lots of wrong things, and you can go on assuming those wrong things until you get a piece of data that shows you that you may be wrong. Or at least that's the hope. So I got a question about how we ought to read the Bible – this ancient text that purports to still have important things to speak into our 21st century context – from our questions over the summer. I also got a question about what to do with parables that have images of God that we don't really like. It's a good question. I want to talk a little about both of those questions using the short parable printed in your bulletin this morning.

Now, when you read that parable, you almost certainly made some assumptions. First, you probably tried to find out who is God in the story, if you're like most people who are reading the parables. Then you tried to see if Jesus is anywhere in there, and of course, we want to know what the parable says about the human condition – so where are we? And if you were to make a lot of traditional assumptions, you may say God is the landowner, who wants good fruit, Jesus is the gardener trying to get us a little more time (mercy), and we are the tree that is trying desperately to do something but not really doing it. The reading here would be that time is up and it's time to do something with our spiritual lives. But you know what they say about assumptions...

What I would ask you to do with a piece of scripture like that is to approach it without these layers of interpretation that we bring to anything. The thing you should bring to a text like this is yourself – your sense of justice, your background, your experiences of right and wrong and love and mercy and truth. The one thing that I would ask you not to do is to make every authority figure in a parable God. To assume and equate God with power or with hierarchy is dangerous. It can lead you to thinking that God is actually not really that kind at all, that God is closer to a warring king, or an angry dinner host than a being of infinite mercy and love. So, do not rush to find God in any parable.

Instead, I invite you into the practice of leisurely strolling your way through a text. Be curious – pick out things that interest you. Pause when you feel like it. Make comments that have nothing to do with one another. Pick wildflowers for a minute in a text, without

an aim or without preconceived notions of truth. See where your creativity and wit and intrigue lead you in a text that is at least 1900 years old.

And after you've done that, bring a spirit of play to what you find. Ask nonsensical questions – “what would being a tree feel like?” “What if this story doesn't have God in it at all?” “What if God were the weakest part of this story?” That's what will lead you to some interesting interpretations.

So, when I read this text, I read my experience of God into things, and I try to see the ways that this story can be relevant to my experience. And I just have to believe that sometimes I water God, sometimes I give God manure – well, plenty of times really. It's usually you, my friends and congregants, who are approaching me and saying “what about this whole God thing? When is that going to actually do anything? When is God going to show up, or is that even possible for God to show up? When will God do something about the present darkness of the world?” And that, in my very personalized experience, places those who ask those questions in the role of the landowner. Myself, I ask for another year, I say, surely something will happen soon. Who knows if its true, but we're not going to dig this fig tree up right now. We're not going to give up on God. And I water God with my life, my attempts to bring justice and light and life. My feeble attempt at poetry for the call to commitment, and my own attempts to bring more light to this world. Sometimes, I water God.

And that is absolutely not what the author of this Gospel or even Jesus himself intended for me to get from this text – almost certainly. But, why should that keep us from making expansive and interesting meaning that informs our lives? It shouldn't. Scripture is in our hands now, and it is up to us to figure out how to use it. Scripture does not have any preconceived notions of how to read it baked in, and it is up to us to interpret. That is a heavy responsibility because our interpretations can either foster love, or breed hate. They can make the world brighter, or they can dim it. They can announce God's radical welcome for all, or they can create exclusion. And that's why we read scripture having been formed by an ethic of love and justice and mercy and truth. We read it from that perspective.

So, don't make God the most powerful person in a parable automatically, check your assumptions at the door, and open yourself to new readings of scripture. Be playful. If you do, you might be surprised what you find, and who knows – it could even change your life. It wouldn't be the first time. You may even find that it is you that end up watering God.