

God Sure Comes In Handy

Psalm 27, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Have you ever felt used? I mean, have you ever felt “taken advantage of”? I’m sure most, if not all of us have felt the hurt mixed with anger that comes from feeling that our good nature has been taken for granted. “Taken for granted” I think is at one end of the scale. The other end of the scale is when we realize that we’ve been intentionally “played”, that someone thought they saw a big “M” on our foreheads. “M” for “mark,” and then made us their targets.

I confess I have felt used from time to time. And, that feeling has reared its ugly head over the last several years, and not just over being taken financially, but also in situations where I have invested my emotions and then discover that I’ve been “used”. It’s like a kick in the stomach. It’s the stuff that makes for tossing and turning at night instead of sleeping, and wondering how this could have happened when I only wanted to help.

Lately, I have been wondering how God feels about being “taken for granted”. Since God made us in His image, I think it’s fair to say that God, too, has feelings. From our Old Testament readings we see how God reacted to the Children of Israel’s foolish, self-centered ways. After getting them out of bondage, emancipating them from slavery, we see God’s disappointment when they turned away from Him, then we see patience as He waited for their return, and then anger when they didn’t, and then compassion as God when they did.

In the New Testament we read about Jesus’ feelings, which were very human yet very much part of the divine persona. Here, we also see anger, when He felt that God, His Father, was being disrespected, as in that scene where He “lost it” with the people trying to make the temple into a Mall. Then we see another side. Jesus wept. (This is the shortest verse in the whole Bible.). Jesus wept when He looked over Jerusalem from the hillside road into the city and groaned from a grieved heart. The people weren’t responding to His invitation to come, to be gathered to Him, as a mother hen gathers her chicks. And it hurt.

Jesus wept at the graveside of his friend. Jesus laughed and partied with the outcasts of society. Jesus formed human, loving bonds with those who hung out with Him. I wonder how He felt when Judas, a friend, betrayed Him? I wonder how He felt when the whole bunch of them, save His mother, and a few women and John were the only ones left as He hung dying on the cross? We know how He felt when He thought He’d been abandoned by His Father that day. His cry of “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” has echoed through the centuries – the cry of millions who feel God has given up on them.

I wonder how God feels? I wonder how God feels about us today.

As you know, we have a group of ten or twelve that meet each Tuesday morning. We call the group “Prayer and Share”. It’s an open group, and anyone is welcome. You don’t have to sign up – just come.

At Prayer and Share we spend a little time singing – about 20 minutes or so, then a time of very comfortable, casual, contemporary-style praying, and then about a half hour of Bible Study. Right now we’re studying Jesus’ life using a comparative lining up of all four Gospels.

About a month ago, we were close to finishing up our study when the door to the Living Room, (formerly known as the Friendship Room, before that the Parlour, and a long time ago “The Ladies’

Parlour”) – came flying open. In walked a man, a stranger to the group. I had seen Jesse, I’ll call him, before, when he would come in to talk to our resident street outreach minister, Danny. But no one else knew him, and it had been a long time since I had seen him.

Jesse joined the circle, and after having welcomed him our agenda changed. He said that as he was about to drive by the church, he discovered he couldn’t. He just had to stop in for prayer, and when he found there was a prayer session happening right then, he had come up to the Living Room to join it. He shared with us that his partner was in hospital battling liver cancer, was badly jaundiced, and that things weren’t looking very good. So, right then and there we prayed for her, and for Jesse, and then shortly after he got up to leave. As he was going, he said “at times like this, God sure comes in handy.”

I have been mulling over that sentence since then.

There was no question that Jesse was upset. Anyone who has attended the bedside of a friend or loved one battling cancer or cirrhosis of the liver will have a picture of what he had just seen. And the feeling of hopelessness and desperation called for a Power greater than himself and greater than the medical profession whose prognosis for Jesse’s loved one was dismal, at best.

I wondered, though, in my quiet moments, without the slightest sense of criticism of Jesse’s feeling of need, or lack of empathy for what he was going through, how God felt when compared to a screwdriver, or a wrench, or a kitchen tool that comes in “handy” when needed.

The other day I was listening to CBC Radio One in the car and heard an interview with the owner of “Creepy Crawly Critters”. (I think that was the name of the company). This man’s mission, apparently, is to introduce all kinds of exotic and domestic bugs to the human species through his travelling road show, and to point out how loveable and cuddly these bugs can be. He seemed to be a one man anti bug-discrimination activist. To prove his point (now remember this is radio and I’m driving, so I had to imagine what was happening) it appears he placed a large tarantula-like bug on the female interviewer’s arm. All I could hear coming over my speakers was “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God”. I gather it was a prayer of sorts. I’m not sure this prayer came from lips that were accustomed to praying, or not. However the intonations sounded more like swearing than supplications.

I wonder how God felt?

Very recently I heard an excellent speaker, I’ll call him Brent W. who was telling his life story. Apparently, having been raised in a family where church was part of his growing-up years, our speaker reached a point where, as he said, “I fired God.” I thought “ouch.” God has now moved from being a commodity, a tool that can be taken off the shelf, something handy when something needs fixing, through being a an expletive denoting fear, to being an employee who can be “fired” when needed no longer.

I wonder how God felt?

Now, as the story progressed, Brent had hit a really low point in his life. “Bottom” might be a better word. It was when he finally realized that he couldn’t make this life-thing work on his own, that he “re-hired God” (those are my words, not his) and the pieces of life started to fit together again. One thing the speaker said that I loved, (and probably God did too), was “God was a gentleman. He took me back.”

The “god of my understanding” is a phrase that I hadn’t ever heard before coming to Wall Street. I’m not sure I completely “get it” although I do understand the rationale behind where and why it is used. But I keep thinking: what if how I understand God isn’t how God understands himself, or who God really is. What if I think God is only there when I need something, or when I’m afraid, or when life totally falls apart.

For many of us here this morning, the God of our understanding was someone holding lightening rods in one hand and thunderbolts in the other, waiting, watching, ready to hurl them as

soon as we made a mismove. The “God’ll getcha” syndrome was firmly planted in our brains, and fear rather than love was our response.

Now in the days of re-framing the vengeful God image, and promoting God’s all-inclusive love (which truth I will defend till my dying breath) there could easily be a new understanding, where God is a fat old Santa Claus, sitting on a little lavender cloud of permissiveness saying “there, there. I know you didn’t mean it. These things happen. Hush now, don’t you cry”, without any of the “go, and sin no more” follow up.

(Remember Jesus with the woman who had been caught in the act of sexual unfaithfulness to her husband – adultery – a violation of number 7 in the list of the Ten Commandments? Remember His compassion on her as He spoke to the men with stones in their hands ready to kill her for her sin? Remember when Jesus asked the ones without sin to throw the first stone, and they, one by one, skulked away? Then, turning to the woman sprawled out where she’d been dumped by these very men who were about to execute her, He asked her who was there to condemn her? When she said, “No one, Lord” Jesus replied. “Neither do I condemn you.” But that wasn’t all. He also said (together) “... go, and sin no more.”)

I don’t believe that the God of my understanding brings tragedy. I don’t believe Haiti was singled out by God for a major wake-up call. I don’t believe the 20 million Pakistanis are being punished for harbouring the Taliban. I don’t believe that when cancer strikes that the victim has done anything to deserve either the disease, or the excruciating treatment that is involved in, hopefully, their recovery. I don’t believe AIDS is God’s judgment on those with a different sexual orientation. We’ve done things to our world, to our food, to our environment that may have impacted what we, each one, have to go through, though.

If I smoke two packs a day I can’t accuse the God of my understanding of being cruel and mean if I develop lung cancer. If I am promiscuous the chances are I will contract some STD’s. If I step out in front of bus without looking I might easily get flattened.

But the God of my understanding is there, as Jesus was, when for whatever reason I get myself in trouble. Whether I did something to bring it on, or whether I didn’t, if the result is that I am hurting and estranged the “Gentleman” in Jesus is there to forgive, heal, restore, comfort, strengthen and walk with me through the tough spots.

I don’t think these bad things are brought on us by God to shake us up a little, or drop us to our knees. When the bad things happen, they happen to both good and bad people, as do good things. (Remember Jesus saying: God makes the sun rise on both good and bad people. And he sends rain for the ones who do right and for the ones who do wrong. Matthew 5:45 CEV)

Most of us probably think of the state of Tennessee as part of the “Bible Belt”. But it has not always been so. According to author and historian Jack Neely, at the turn of the 19th century, Tennesseans were a largely godless people. Traveling evangelists and missionaries made little impression on either the cotton growers on the west end of the state or the hillbillies on the eastern end.

Then on December 16th, 1811, a massive earthquake rolled across the southern United States. The ground cracked and shifted, houses collapsed, mountains spewed forth jets of hot water, and the smell of sulfur filled the air. And suddenly, people across Tennessee and the whole South began to pray. A number of small earthquakes followed the big one. And along with the increase in earthquakes came an increase in church attendance. The Methodist Church alone, says Neely, reported an increase of 50% in membership in its southern churches in the year 1812. Nothing will make you look for a Higher Power quicker than a good earthquake. When the ground around you is shaking, it is only human to seek that which is unshakable.

We live in a world that all too often is shaken, and not necessarily shaken by God: financial meltdowns, terrorism, all kinds of public disasters, and an endless array of personal tragedies that

can happen at any time to any of us, or to those we love--automobile accidents, sickness, loss of a job, breakup of a marriage, random violence.ⁱ

And if the God of our understanding is “handy” when we need Him, the “gentle-man” that Brent referred to, and is the One that Marc sang about, ready to touch us, make it right, relieve us of our heavy burden, then I’m quite certain God takes far less offense at being “used”, being taken for granted, or taken advantage of, than we would. That’s what makes God God, and reminds us that we are us. And it seems to be an ‘always’ thing as Lisa read to us: “The Father is a merciful God, who **always** gives us comfort. He comforts us when we are in trouble ...” 2 Corinthians 1:3a-4b CEV Or as David said:

“God is our refuge and strength,
always ready to help in times of trouble” Psalm 46:1 NLT

Somehow the bad stuff that comes our way becomes the nudge (or the push) to change our focus, to adjust our thinking, and realize who this God of our understanding really is!

Let us pray. Help us, God, to understand enough about You so that we can respond to Your love. Amen

ⁱ Rev. Gary Bagley, Pastor Cathedral of Hope, Houston