

Simply Bow

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The story of the Fall in Genesis is no doubt a familiar one to you. In some ways perhaps it may be too familiar. Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil after God forbids them to do so. That wily serpent tempts them to disobey the very first rule in the history of the world. Of course God finds out about it and judges them sinners for their disobedience. They are banished from the paradise of Eden. Forever are they and their descendants marked with the stain of original sin.

That is the story as most of us have heard it. However this interpretation of Adam and Eve's fall really belongs to the Apostle Paul. In the book of Romans, Paul is setting up Jesus as the anti-Adam. Adam brings sin into the world, and Jesus removes it through the crucifixion and resurrection. The implication being that God's judgment of this seemingly minor

transgression is permanent separation from humanity. Who among us has not snuck an errant cherry in the produce aisle of the grocery store when the manager's back is turned? Is this illegal? OK. Is it immoral? Perhaps. Is it a crime unworthy of forgiveness and mercy by an all-loving God? Certainly not.

It is interesting to compare the Quran's version of these events. The story is much simpler and without unnecessary detail. Adam and Eve are tricked by Satan. Adam admits he messed up, and asks God for forgiveness; and God gives it. The blame is instead firmly affixed where it should have been all along: with Satan! Contrary to the stereotype that we sometimes hear about Islam, in this instance it is Allah who is clearly the more compassionate and understanding deity. Adam is mature about coming clean regarding his mistake, and God is not judgmental of him. God instead responds with mercy.

Judgment is a powerful force in our world. Often it is unavoidable. We have to be able to judge things as good or bad at a very basic level. I recommend being very judgmental about the expiration date of the milk in your refrigerator! Being able to discern the difference between fresh and sour milk is a handy skill in life. And in many ways that is where the problems come

in. Being judgmental, the ability to say this is good and this is bad, is a handy tool to survive in the world. It ensures that our food is fresh and our lawns are mowed. And because it is so handy a skill, we start to over use it. We start judging each other, ourselves, even entire nations against our unconscious standards of perfection and the way we think things ought to be.

Sadly we have seen too many examples of judgmentalism in the past couple of weeks. Pat Robertson justified the earthquake in Haiti as the comeuppance for a so called “pact with the devil” made two hundred years ago. Such a claim is so obviously ludicrous that it hardly requires argument. I guess I am just surprised that we are still surprised by him. Haven’t we come to expect such self-contradictory claims from Robertson? But imagine the theology implicit here: God is keeping track of every wrong, judging each person, each nation by every action, and when the time is right, and for some reason it was two hundred years later in this case, he strikes! In his article in the New York Times this week, Nicholas Kristof writes, “While it’s not for a journalist to nitpick a minister’s theological credentials, that implication of belated seismic revenge on Haitian children seems defamatory of God.” I could not have said it better myself.

This has its secular versions as well. Bill O'Reilly said this past week, "Once again, we will do more than anyone else on the planet, and one year from today Haiti will be as bad as it is right now." The assumption of course is that somehow "It's their fault." While O'Reilly does not invoke the divine, he still sits in this place of judging other people based on blind prejudice. He deems them unworthy. Sadly he is not alone. Kristof shares some of the comments that readers posted on his blog: giving money to Haiti is foolish because they are corrupt. One reader said that they have low IQs and that is why they are in poverty. It's their fault. These readers seemed to have their judgment of who was worthy of help and who is not, based upon their actions to a degree, but it is more our perceptions than the actual facts.

Those facts reveal very intriguing things. Haiti is an impoverished country not because of corruption, and it's not because they are stupid, and it certainly wasn't because of God's holy vengeance. Their poverty is a direct result of foreign debt. To pay off this crippling debt to nations such as France, Haiti's former colonial power, they embarked on a huge deforesting campaign. Without forests, the topsoil eroded and the agriculture industry fell apart. I don't know what your definition of God is,

but I didn't see him or her in this little set up. And we would be hard-pressed to place the blame on the Haitian people for being victims of their colonial past. Unless we can somehow blame them for tectonic plates shifting in the Earth's crust! Surly that had to be their fault?!

The point here is not who rightly deserves blame for Haiti's poverty or the earthquake. The point is why do we feel the need to assign blame in the first place? The reality is that the God in the Hebrew Bible has nothing on us when it comes to being judgmental of others. Our own minds are far far better at it than he ever was. We can come up with a thousand reasons to justify it to ourselves, but the plain fact is that we are always judging others. "He is good, she is bad." "That one I love, this one I will avoid." Our prejudices are all over the place.

My friends beware. Owning a judgmental mind is like owning a pet tiger. Sure it can ravage others, but at some point it will turn on its owner! For like a tiger whose hunger is never satiated, so too is the judgmental mind. It is not enough to judge who is the coolest kid in the class, or the uncoolest kid in the class. What we are really doing is asking ourselves, "Are they cooler than me?" Am I better than them? And if I don't measure

up, then I erode a little piece of my self-esteem. People write things like, “The Haitian people must be dumb or corrupt or cursed by God to have gotten their just deserts.” What is implied of course that therefore America is the best nation on earth and is blessed by God. It is that little story we tell ourselves that I am better than them, so of course bad things should have happened to them and not me.

When tragedies like the Haitian earthquake happen, they unearth these judgments in a very explicit way. But they are going on all the time on a smaller scale. That guy at work that you know is an idiot; that is judgmental mind. That wonderful fantastic person in your field that seems to have all the answers and people fawn all over them at the annual convention; that too is judgmental mind. And the problem with it is that the judgmental mind diminishes you. You see yourself in a very narrow way. When you put someone up on a pedestal you are diminishing yourself. When you put yourself on the pedestal, you diminish them. In Jungian terms, you create a small self.

Shortly after being ordained a monk, Jack Kornfield finds himself faced with exactly this issue. Can he bow when entering a sacred space? Yes. Can he bow when being in the presence of

the wise master and teacher? Yes. Then he finds out you have to bow to everyone! And of course judgmental mind immediately sets in. I have to bow to that lazy old man who just wants to get out of the harvest season this year? Or that lay about young monk? I am a better and more sincere in my practice than that! That is sort of like proclaiming, "I am twice as humble as you are!" It makes no sense. It is just that small sense of self trying to carve out an identity by constantly comparing you to others. Sometimes you measure up, and hubris sets in. Then someone else comes along who is better than you somehow, and you are knocked down a peg. This can be a torturous cycle of suffering.

But the practice of bowing can be a very powerful one. With your physical body you show respect to another and ever so slightly make yourself vulnerable to them. Ironically, bowing can be a great equalizer. A good monk comes along, and you bow. A not so good monk comes along, and you bow. Soon Kornfield discovers that he can relate to the youthful exuberance of the young monks. He honors the pain and endurance of the old farmer. Eventually he finds a connection to each of them. Bowing takes away his judgmental mind, his narrow small self that needs to be constantly comparing him to another. He is able

to gently let this go, and embrace his connection to these other monks. Kornfield comes to experience a larger self that encompasses both himself and the people he is bowing to.

I am afraid the title of my sermon is, therefore, rather ironic. Bowing is not simple. Bowing to everyone regardless of who they are is not easy. Yet I have to imagine that had bowing carried with it the same cultural power in America as it does in Thailand, then I am sure that the Universalists would have told us to bow to everyone. They would have urged us to let go of our small judgmental selves in favor of what they often called the “Larger Faith”. I think they would have preferred the Quran’s version of the so-called fall of Adam with a vision of God that is understanding, quick to forgive, and slow to judge. For you see we don’t need to be so judgmental of each other or ourselves in order to gain approval. There is no need to seek the approval of others by judging ourselves worthy or unworthy. Embracing that larger faith means letting go of seeking and giving approval to each other. You just know you are enough and so are they.

Kornfield writes, “To bow to the fact of our life’s sorrows and betrayals is to accept them; and from this deep gesture we discover that all life is workable. As we learn to bow, we discover

that the heart holds more freedom and compassion than we could imagine.” I think of these two lines in light of the suffering in Haiti. Rather than approaching the problem through some neo-Jobian lens that asks questions like “What did they do to deserve this?” or “Why is God punishing them?” Kornfield suggests some different questions. “How open is your heart to the suffering of Haiti?” Has modern society made you so cynical or comfortably numb so that you cannot allow yourself feel the pain of others? What happens when you see children crying or hear the stories of devastation? I suspect there is no right or wrong thing to feel in such instances, so long as you are aware of feeling something!

The other thing he might ask us is, “Once you are feeling something, how do you respond from compassion?” Certainly giving money to groups like the Red Cross or the UUSC would be an excellent start. The small self asks “Who can I judge and blame?” The people of Haiti, the Earth’s crust, or God? Who do you blame, Adam, Eve, or the Serpent? Large self questions come from an entirely different premise. In what ways are we connected to each other? How is your suffering like mine? What can I do to help? Jack Kornfield, shifted from the small self perspective to the large self by simply bowing to everyone. How

might we regard everyone and everything as worthy of our approval and respect?

I conclude with this poem by Rumi, which Kornfield shares in his book:

“This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all even if they’re a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture.

Still treat each guest honorably, he may be clearing you out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice, meet them at the door laughing, and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from the beyond.”

Amen Blessed Be.