

Sharing God's Glory

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Matthew 9:35, 10:1-7: “And Jesus called to him his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every infirmity.”

Romans 5:1-11: Through [our Lord Jesus Christ] we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.

Goal: To help people see that God's glory is available here and now, it requires no mediator; but it does require unlearning what we have thought about our world and ourselves. It requires releasing fear and welcoming an ever-present hope.

This morning's readings present two views of God's glory, which I'll get to shortly. But first, please open your Bibles this morning to your favorite passage. (Pause for effect) Don't be alarmed; I'm not trying to embarrass anyone. The truth is most Protestants who take a non-literal stance toward Scripture, as the majority of UCC members do, leave their Bibles at home on Sunday mornings. While we may take a less dogmatic approach to scripture than those who walk around, Bible in hand, using their knowledge as a litmus test for social policy, we should not take for granted the Bible's impact in shaping our early understandings of God and ourselves.

Many Christians have chosen to shelve the Bible because it no longer seems relevant to their lives...What they neglect to do in the process, however, is organize the remnants of scripture that still shape their imagination. Our internal images of God, the ones we live by unconsciously are shaped by a variety of factors. Scripture plays a part, as do parents, and other authority figures.

The images themselves are made up of sensory experiences that are always fuzzy, partial and incomplete—as Paul says our knowledge this side of heaven is imperfect. Here's why. Studies have shown that by the age of six most children have established the small g god that will shape their faith for good or ill.

This small g god is nothing more than a representation of the One whose vastness is amazing and incomprehensible. Unfortunately this representation of ours is a misrepresentation at best, that plays havoc with our perspective on life itself.

Loving influences early in our lives go a long way in forming positive internal images of God. But when life is constricted by pain, abuse, illness or trauma ...fear is often the underpinning that holds a negative view of God firmly in place ...well out of reach of reflective thinking.

On our own it is difficult to get at the truth of what we believe; that's why that bumper sticker message—Don't believe everything you think is so on target..

We can change these images, enlarge them through education or therapeutic means, but we can never totally destroy them. The stresses and strains of normal life may not trigger their reappearance, but deep emotional disruptions, such as the loss of a loved one, or an incapacitating illness can release our worst fears when it comes to our sense of safety and selfhood and our small g god.

In my own case, the impact of tuberculosis in my father's life and my own and the disruption caused by our individual stays in TB sanatoriums played havoc with my ability to see God as a benign being. Whatever I learned about God's love in Sunday school that learning could not counter the judgment I carried in my own body. The association between sin and suffering prevalent in scripture (but thoroughly dismissed by Jesus) only confirmed what my 4-year-old brain could comprehend.

I became a prisoner of my own thinking, chained to a misguided but no less real notion that I had been sent away as punishment for a misdeed I could never remember committing. The result was the perverse notion that something was

wrong with my very being... TB was contagious and deadly and it taught my body to believe that **I** was contagious, long after any signs of Tuberculosis had left my body. In its wake the notion that it wasn't safe for people to be in my presence remained a haunting refrain too deep for words to express or insight to discover.

I'll spare you the details but hear me well...as long as we have breath there is hope. With God's help I've been able to jettison this way of thinking—witness my declaration in song to the children this morning: “I am healthy and I'm happy and I'm whole!” It may sound silly to some, but what you saw this morning was God's glory in action.

Some people get to this place faster than I did, and many people...praise God...start out that way and stay that way. It may have taken me 50+ years to come to the place where these words of joy tumbled out, but this I know; God was rooting for me every step of the way. I know now that whenever I mistook feelings of unworthiness, depression and self-hatred as messages from God—my small g god had the upper hand. She pops out now and then, but my recovery time is infinitesimal compared to what it once was.

Now what has this to do with God's glory? The Biblical notion of Glory conveys God's magnificence and wonder, the beauty of God and God's splendor. As Rabbi Heschel taught God's glory is intertwined with a sense of radical amazement. In the Torah God's glory is associated with mystery and the wonder of the natural world ...very often it is best expressed by consuming clouds that carried with them a sense of awe.

Later the Psalmist expresses awe in the relationship between God and humanity:

O God, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
above the heavens...

³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,

⁴ what is a human being that you are mindful of him,
the human one that you care for her?

⁵ You have made her a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

That the whole earth is full of God's glory is another common declaration, but the notion I find most compelling is that of the Second century theologian, Irenaeus: In his view the glory of God is a human being fully alive. Let me say that again: the glory of God is a human being fully alive. The glory of God gives life and to those who receive this glory life in all its fullness reveals our interconnectedness with God's being.

As I said before two perspectives on God's glory are expressed in the reading from Matthew and the reading from Paul. Jesus seeks to bestow abundant life by his own healing ways and the authority he gives to others to heal in his name. In this sense Irenaeus' notion of God's glory is on full display... you and I have the authority directly to be bearer's of God's glory to others. Healing is our birthright in God and Jesus carries this good news wherever he goes.

In Paul's writing there is a subtle shift...we are called to share good news but the good news is not about the healing ministry of Jesus. Paul's good news is about Jesus' death, for through his death, Paul believes, we share in God's glory, not in this life but in the life to come. In Paul's view reconciliation with God requires that Jesus is the sole mediator of God's glory...Paul also believes that our sins make us enemies of God because of the disobedience of, Adam and Eve.

Stop: we need a brain rest...[A congregational member has just shouted out these words and rung a bell—this was a Goudey set-up, for effect] Ah, caught me in the nick of time... the lives of Adam and Eve could cover a million sermons that I don't intend to give in my lifetime. The first one almost did in my ministry in its first year...that's

another story too. Let's get back to basics here. For those of you, who have begun to hear me saying, blah blah blah let me say this: come back, wake up; don't go away... too many people do just that. They tune out when they should be tuning in.

Religion at its best ties us back, literally brings us back to our life source—which is God's glory. Religion turned in on itself usually because of fear not awe brings us back or binds us—not to God's glory but to human misconceptions of God's glory. This is the difference between small g religion and big G religion. Small g religion sees god in its own image; big G religion let's God be fully God.

Before he was murdered in 1944 for trying to help assassinate Hitler, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his Famous Letters from Prison of a *religionless religion*... We have his words but not their meaning but I suspect he was not far off from Meister Eckhart's notion: "I pray God to rid me of God"

If we truly want to know and share in God's glory, we need to recognize the difference between little g theology and big G theology/religion. Many times Paul wrote from a big G perspective and he wrote with eloquence....but his vision that Christ died for our sins is little g theology through and through.

We are not the enemies of God and God can never be our enemy. God and we **is** One being. That's big G theology! God and we **are** one, is little g theology. Get it? Let me say it again, big G theology is this: God and we **is** One being; God and we **are** one, is little g theology.

To talk about God rightly we need to celebrate the glory of God within us. That doesn't mean we excuse the wrong we do or ignore the consequences of our actions, it means that we read Jesus right. Jesus didn't preach the glory of God he lived it...he calls all of us to be fully alive, not perfect, not without wounds, but fully in touch with God's grace and our place in eternity with God, here and now... "Just as we are."

Here are a few ways to taste God's glory here and now, *Just as you are*:*

Choose to turn off the negative tapes and accept yourself for who you are and who you are becoming.

Ground yourself in the Love of the Beloved. Read Jesus...Accept God's unconditional love...practice meditation and prayer.

Don't run... face your fears.

*Breathe in the moment...*focus on the here and now

*Unclutter your life...*Stuff is a poor substitute for love

Say I choose to do this, rather than I should, or I must.

Offer others and yourself compassion, grace and forgiveness.

Embrace your basic goodness and the goodness in others...

Finally, remember that even if your Bible is home on a shelf gathering dust...there are dusty parts still at work in your life. Some parts are good, some are not so helpful, and some may be downright dangerous to your health. Take time to look at your theology, how you image Spirit in your life? Do you live by little g theology or big G? It makes a difference and this difference matters. To **G**od be the glory. Amen.

*I have taken these points from an article by Esther Elizabeth in the June 2005 newsletter *Journey into Freedom*.
www.journeyintofreedom.org