

“Where Is God?”

Psalm 14, Ephesians 3:14-21

July 29th, 2012

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“Where is God?” It is a very difficult question to get a clear answer if you are questioning the almighty God in the midst of suffering and unspeakable miserable times in your lives. I don’t dare to give you a right answer this morning. But, I would take a different approach to respond to this question. In the creation story, when Adam ate the forbidden fruit that God prohibited, he hid because he was afraid of what he had done before God.

Do you remember what God’s first question was to Adam? At Genesis 3:9, God asked, “Where are you, Adam?” God wasn’t trying to find his physical location, but God wanted to check their relationship by asking, “How are you doing?” Like our first Scripture reading, Psalm 14, some people feel frustrated in their hearts, and say, “There is no God.” But in most cases, they do not mean to find God’s physical location in the universe, but they express their frustration either by acknowledging that they are in crisis or by confessing that they are very helpless and hopeless. According to USA Today, religious statistics report, 90 percent of Americans believe in God (99% decades ago), and 76% are Christians, but more than 20% left their faith tradition to no religious affiliation. In fact, in most cases, people do not question about God, but they have a problem with the church or its people. What is wrong with our understanding of God?

Seven years ago, when I worked at the Langley Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (UCSF) as a hospital chaplain for three months, I had a great opportunity to establish relationships with patients there. Many patients were sent there because they tried to commit suicide, had serious psychic episodes (hallucination or misperception of God) and had serious bipolar and clinical depression. One Jewish girl, 18 years old wanted to talk to me because she was so afraid to take electroconvulsive therapy for her serious depression. Simply speaking, the doctor gives her electric shocks 8 times. While I was having sessions, she wished to be centered, grounded in God like me (but she was not able to center herself; her world was so fragile and unstable). The hospital allows chaplains to work with the psychiatric patients, because chaplains are spiritually grounded and a good role model to the patients there. Speaking of ‘being grounded and centered’, there was a famous human development psychologist, Eric Erickson. He introduced eight stages of psychological development throughout life’s journey. I will speak about the first stage which is to attain and establish “basic trust” from the parents. He argues that if ‘basic

trust' is successfully established in childhood, when we become adults and face difficulties and sufferings, we can handle it better than the other groups who didn't learn 'basic trust'. Isn't it interesting? In this sense, our Christian faith is understood as a matter of relationship between God and us. Faith is "basic trust" in God. Do we have trust in God or not? Faith or trust enables us to open our hearts and helps us to be rooted and grounded in God. Last week, strong winds shook my van and it didn't handle well when I was driving back home from the Bay area. I was scared. Our faith may be like this. If we are not grounded well, we can be easily shaken even by a strong wind.

Someone shared this story with me. It touched my heart, so I would like to share this with you. "While watching a Sunday service in Atlanta, the church was honoring one of its senior pastors who had been retired many years. He was 92 at that time and I wondered why the church even bothered to ask the old gentleman to preach at that age. He was warmly welcomed, introduced as the speaker. When the applause quieted down, he rose from his high back chair and walked slowly, with great effort and a sliding gait to the podium. Without a note or written paper of any kind he placed both hands on the pulpit to steady himself and then quietly and slowly he began to speak.... "When I was asked to come here today and talk to you, your pastor asked me to tell you what was the greatest lesson ever learned in my 50-odd years of preaching. I thought about it for a few days and boiled it down to just one thing that made the most difference in my life and sustained me through all my trials. The one thing that I could always rely on when tears and heartbreak and pain and fear and sorrow paralyzed me... the only thing that would comfort was this verse.....

"Jesus loves me this I know. For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong,
we are weak but He is strong.....
Yes, Jesus loves me.... The Bible tells me so."

Apostle Paul gives us inspirational advice through Ephesians 3: 17. He says "I pray that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are **being rooted and grounded in love**. (NRSV)" Eugene Peterson offers us a better understanding in his book, The Message saying, "Christ will live in you as **you open the door and invite him in**. And if you are **planted firmly on love**, you'll be able to experience the extravagant love of Jesus." Our faith comes from Jesus Christ and the essence of Jesus Christ is "Love". Jesus started a new movement of "love". He introduced a new image of God to people that the Israelites had never imagined and heard before. "You are invited to the unconditional love of God, who accepts you as you are."

During my hospital work, I had a chance to work with a Jewish Orthodox Rabbi for one year. We had a great conversation about different understandings of God between Judaism and Christianity. The Jewish tradition does not pay much attention to the concept of the love of God. Rather they are more focused on the world peace, Zionism and God's justice. Love is not the core of understanding of God.

In the Korean culture, the love of God was a new idea until American missionaries brought the good news in 1885. At that time, Korea was under a strict caste dynasty. Women were classified as a lower class than men. Christianity brought the value of equality in human dignity, mutual acceptance and unconditional welcome to everyone. But North Korea still doesn't have this understanding yet. North Koreans emphasize "loyalty" and "duty" based on Confucianism. You should do your duty to others. For example, be loyal to the father as a son, wife to husband. There is no concept of unconditional acceptance in their relationships. What Jesus preached and taught to people was simple and clear: "Welcome to the Love of God" whoever you are, either gentiles, or Jews, man or woman, homosexual or heterosexual, the young or the old. God chose all of us as His children and invited us to come and experience 'extravagant hospitality' in Him. God widely opens his arm and accepts us. Again, "welcome to the love of God" is what we believe in our faith and it is "basic trust" and "faith".

Two weeks ago, Rev. Dan Fado shared a very prophetic message with us. He worried about the direction of our denomination for the future. It is true that specific ideas voted on at the General Conference 2012 brought our denomination anxiety and disappointment that the United Methodist Church agreed that we disagree on homosexuality as Christian teaching. But this doesn't mean that God doesn't work here with us anymore. Rather God encourages all of us to stand up to what is wrong and proclaim that Jesus loves each of us as a child of God. God invites us to be a strong witness for the love of God. God urges us to continue on Jesus' movement for the Kingdom of God.

I am aware of the good news that the Western Jurisdictional meeting July 18-21 voted to extend "["extravagant hospitality"](#) to all people. Bishop Minerva Carcaño, president of the Western Jurisdiction College of Bishops said during her address to the jurisdiction, "We believe that our beloved United Methodist Church has been less than faithful to the biblical mandate to accept all God's children including our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. We assume responsibility for preaching and teaching in every place we serve, this good news of Christ Jesus who welcomes all."

“Where is our God?” Our God is in our hearts, within us and dwells in us and works with us as we are planted and rooted in love and God will continue to nurture us. God will be with us while we are growing, working and building the Kingdom of God through His unending, unconditional and extravagant hospitality to every creation. This is what we believe in, Jesus Christ and this is a key to find out where God is. Jesus loves me and you. You pray for me and I pray for you. We are all God’s loving children out of one body and one God. Amen.