

Sermon 9-14-25, Ex 32:7-14, Lk 15: 1-10

The scripture for today really caused me to lean into my identity as a chaplain – and a word of warning – a chaplain will likely leave you with more questions than answers...

The role of a chaplain is to ask questions that support others in remembering and reconnecting with their own coping strategies and belief systems

One question that today's scripture brings up is

What is the nature of God? / / /

This is a question that I often explore with patients

I think of the 50-year-old woman with newly diagnosed triple-negative breast cancer – a very aggressive and difficult-to-treat cancer -- who finds the courage to ask “Is God punishing me for something?” as she comes to terms with how every aspect of her life is now upended and at risk

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What is the nature of God?

This is an age-old question that humankind continues to wrestle with

Not only among various religious traditions

But also within Christianity

Maybe especially within Christianity

This disagreement is understandable – as we have two conflicting examples of God's nature in scripture today.

In Exodus, the Lord says to Moses: “...Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them” (Ex. 32:10)

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Then in Luke Jesus likens God to one who continues to seek, welcome and rejoice over humankind – especially those who have “been lost”

Throughout scripture we can find examples of God’s nature to justify whatever perspective we choose to hold

As we can with most issues

Is God slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love or punishing sinners in judgement?

Perhaps the more challenging debate lies within the questions about ourselves

What do we believe?

How do we live out those beliefs?

How do we respond when we inevitably bump up against life circumstances and people who challenge those beliefs?

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I utilize psychology and sociology often as a chaplain, and draw upon those studies as I reflect on theology – the study of God – today

Anthropomorphism is placing human attributes on things or beings that are not human

We do this with our pets all the time, imagining their mood or desires

We do this with plants and trees, imagining the grass is crying out in despair after days without rain – or rejoicing after the rain finally comes

It’s easy with these examples to recognize how we’re likely projecting ourselves onto our dog or cat or lawn

But what about with God?

Might we also project ourselves onto who we wish God to be?

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So I read and reflect upon today's scripture with the awareness that anthropomorphism and projecting are real

I also reflect on them from an Internal Family Systems perspective which acknowledges that we have different, and sometimes competing parts of ourselves that influence our thoughts and behavior

This acknowledges how at times there is a part of myself that wants my enemy to suffer AND a part of myself that wants to extend compassion to my enemy

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Going back to the reading from Exodus with this perspective I think about Moses

Moses who at the beginning of his call story begged God to pick someone else – anyone else – to do this work

Moses who realized the difficulty of his call and lamented the grumbling and complaining of the Israelites to God

Moses who continually turned around and devoted himself to guiding and teaching these people who kept messing up and falling short of “the plan”

Moses who today implored God to return to God's good nature – and changed God's mind

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The Israelites built the golden calf and began worshipping it instead of God

This is the famous example of idolatry that Abrahamic traditions reference

But, it also demonstrates humankind's greed –

And desire to possess and control God

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If God seems to stretch us too far out of our comfort zone

Let's project onto God traits that are more like us

Let us make a god into one we can understand

And abide

And feel better about worshipping

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So we hear this anger from God in the book of Exodus over the people worshipping the golden calf and breaking the covenant

They break their promise to worship only God

They cannot keep their end of the bargain

And God is angry – so angry God plans to burn wrath hot against them and consume them!

But I wonder

Is this God's anger

Or Moses'?

Moses - After years of serving in this role that he didn't really want

Teaching and guiding and nurturing these people

Literally participating in saving their lives

While being on the receiving end of their grumbling and disobedience

I wonder if Moses is angry

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Fast-forward about 1200 years and the religious leaders are grumbling

The Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus who cannot be controlled

Jesus the Christ cannot be predicted or contained

Jesus' love is bigger than what the law holds as he welcomes those outsiders

Jesus, one with God, is despised and rejected

Jesus persists in showing compassion to sinners

Those who aren't keeping the covenant promise with God

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Jesus gives us yet another window through which to glimpse the nature of God

Through his own actions

And with two parables

One about a shepherd and one about a woman

These are two other groups in addition to the tax collectors that the Pharisees looked down upon

And here Jesus likens God to both a shepherd and a woman / /

Jesus draws us a picture with his story of God who rejoices over those who return to God – and calls a huge celebration!

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What is the nature of God?

Jesus is trying to show the Pharisees that their righteousness has become a barrier to their ability to experience God

Perhaps the merit of following the law is not the most important thing

Somehow keeping track of right and wrong is preventing them from sharing in God's love and celebration

“there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk 15:7)

The wild thing is that in these parables we know that neither sheep nor coins can repent

There is no criticism of the sheep who wandered off, wondering what was it thinking and how long it wasn't paying attention to where it SHOULD have been going

It's laughable to blame a coin for getting lost in the couch but I suppose we'd likely blame the caretaker of that coin for being so irresponsible

God is rejoicing over what the Pharisees would have called worthless sheep and coins

Who cannot even repent

Which begs the question -- can we repent?

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In spite of Moses' – or God's anger

In spite of ignorance and sinning and irresponsibility

God keeps the covenant

God keeps God's promise

God continues to show humankind mercy

And Jesus is calling the Pharisees – and us - out

God calls us out of the human nature of judgement and criticism

And toward God's celebration

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What is the nature of God?

Maybe deciding we know the answer to that question is like building another golden calf

Maybe focusing on God's nature is yet another way to avoid confronting our own nature

What parts of ourself want to burn hot against someone

What parts of ourself feel justified in the good works we do

What parts of ourself continue to notice the short-comings of others

What parts of ourself criticize our own mistakes or times when we chose poorly

What parts of ourself limit our ability to celebrate and rejoice for keeping track of all our own faults and all that's wrong in this world

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What is the nature of God?

I do know that I want God to be slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love when I'm looking into this woman's tearful eyes listening to her fears about not seeing her teenage daughter graduate from high school

I also recognize the part of me that wants God to be a flaming hot wrath consuming the one whose actions and words seem so wrong

And because of that I know that I have to let it go – and let God be God

And refocus on my call and challenge as a Christian

To continue to wrestle with the enormity of God's love

To believe that God keeps God's promise even when I can't keep mine

To give love to myself and to my neighbor in ridiculous and generous ways

And in the midst of it all,

**celebrate** and **rejoice** with God

Amen.