

God's Will and My/Our Inadequacy

Exodus 32:1-26b

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Mrs. Potts (pronounced with a “long o,” as in “post”) was my 5th grade teacher – a challenging and often gruff teacher who never shied from giving homework assignments. The incident I remember most easily during that 1963-64 school year is President Kennedy’s assassination; but there is one other memorable incident. One day Mrs. Potts was verbally describing a map she had seen drawn on television of the borders of the United States. She stood in front of the class and said: “Imagine this outline of the borders beginning in Florida, going up past Washington, around Maine, and past The Great Lakes . . .” Donna Jones raised her hand. “Yes, Donna?” asked Mrs. Potts. “Did your TV outline back up?” Donna inquired. “What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Potts. Donna replied, “You said the line went from Florida to Washington to Maine and to The Great Lakes. It would have to back up to go from Maine to the Great Lakes if the line had already gone past Washington.” Mrs. Potts may have been having a bad day for reasons we did not know. Her brow furrowed and her nose crinkled. She stared at Donna as if lasers were shooting from her eyes. “Not the State of Washington. I meant the capital of the United States in Washington, D.C.! From Florida, the line was moving counter-clockwise!” said Mrs. Potts with a “Hrumpf!” – whereupon she pivoted and turned toward the chalkboard behind her desk, above which a spring-activated, roll-up map was mounted. She reached with her right hand and pulled down hard while pivoting counterclockwise to face the class. When she did this, her firm pull on the map and the motion of her body back toward the class broke the map from its hanger. Mrs. Potts turned back toward the wall in time to see the map cylinder fall and crash to the floor. The class exploded in laughter, but when Mrs. Potts pivoted back in our direction to see who was laughing, 27 students suddenly had straight faces; but Donna was the 28th, and she could not get the laughing look off her face quite fast enough. “You, Miss Jones, are staying in during recess today,” Mrs. Potts growled through her teeth. At which point she took a breath to regain her composure, and said, “Y’all know the boundaries of the United States. That’s enough geography for today. Take out your math books.” 54 years ago, Mrs. Potts was having a bad day, and I remember it like it was last week.

The Hebrews – who had been liberated from slavery a few months back – are journeying through the Sinai Peninsula wilderness between Egypt and northwest Arabia. Their leader Moses has been on a continuing education event up the mountain from their camp. While on the mountain, God indicates to Moses that there’s a problem back at the campsite. In fact, God tells Moses, “YOUR people have acted perversely” (v.7). Moses then argues for God, please, to take a deep breath and be forgiving. God agrees to take a deep breath; yet when Moses turns, starts his descent, and comes into view of the camp where the former slaves/ the recently liberated Hebrews are dancing and socializing in front of a golden calf statue, Moses “loses his cool” (or his composure) and actually takes on the same “hot-burning anger” which God first expressed on the mountain in Moses’ presence (v.10; v.19). Furious at the situation, Moses throws the stone tablets down upon the rocky ground, whereupon – like Mrs. Potts yanking down the retractable map – the stone tablets shatter.

Across the centuries, this Scripture has been preached from the angle (1) of how sinful the people are who danced and drank before that golden calf, and how they got what they deserved with punishment. It’s also been preached from the angle (2) of how Moses should not have lost his composure and broken the first set of stone tablets. In fact, Scripture clearly tells that God cut the initial tablets and gave them to Moses (Exodus 31:18 and Deuteronomy 9:17). Then Scripture says that God required Moses to cut the replacement set – after Moses broke the first set (Exodus 34:1 and Deuteronomy 10:1). These verses have been preached from the angle (3) of God changing God’s own mind (or initial inclinations) and letting go of the hot-anger (32:14). And these verses have been preached from the angle (4) of condemning the golden calves we worship as our idols in contrast to God’s call to us in the tough-present, seeking a better, faithful focus from us as we move into God’s future. This year during the season of Lent, however, First Presbyterian-Bryan is considering several contrasts beginning with “God’s will.” This week the contrast is “God’s will and my (our) inadequacy.” Let me suggest that when we feel inadequate, it’s often because we cannot control circumstances, and we cannot control other people.

When someone is having an emotional meltdown, whether it’s Moses or Mrs. Potts, I can think of six reactions: (1) drawing up in fear; (2) snickering in derision; (3) lashing out in return; (4) becoming snarky and patronizing; (5) avoiding any effort to inquire respectfully about the anger; (6) trying to understand the various dynamics and to seek and work for an improved outcome. (1) When someone’s “fuse is lit” and when a tirade

erupts, drawing up in fear is a response of self-protection. Look for shelter. (2) Snickering in derision is risky. I learned that in the 5th grade. If you're caught snickering, you can be detained and miss recess. (3) Lashing out "in return" matches outburst for outburst: "Hey! Cut that out! If you can throw lightning bolts, I can throw stone tablets!" (4) Becoming snarky and patronizing only makes the situation worse, even if the snarky person feels better for having said something clever: "Can I get you a chill pill?" or "Well, surely you feel better now!" (5) Avoiding all efforts to inquire respectfully about the anger only leaves the situation unaddressed which led to the outburst in the first place, so no better options are attempted. (6) Trying to understand the various dynamics and to seek and work for an improved outcome is the best and the constructive option of the six, but we only arrive at this best and constructive option by realizing how the first five illustrate various forms of my (our) inadequacy. Those five are options to which we easily give ourselves. We opt for them because they are naturally reactive. The more difficult option is the one we most naturally avoid, and it's the one necessitating tough, persistent effort.

Moses initially understands God's anger and does not feel inadequate facing God's anger; so Moses stays with God in the tense, awkward moments of God's fuming. Moses' response to God is none of the first five: no drawing up in fear, no derisive snickering, no lashing out in return, no becoming snarky or patronizing, no walking away. Moses stays with God to engage in a sensitive conversation. (Please understand: my observations do not imply that anyone should ever naively do nothing in the face of physical or emotional danger. Self-protection is essential. With that being said –) Might we realize, though, that we often feel inadequate when we cannot control others – as we might like to do; and we can feel inadequate to engage in difficult conversations which are necessary as we are called to honor God's holiness in relationships. Since there is a holy dimension to human relationships, tenacious, respectful care is essential in our relationships.

In the heat of the moment, at first not God, not Moses, not the people had any inclination to offer tenacious, respectful care. But neither the moment of anyone's red-hot anger being expressed nor a less than adequate / less than constructive reaction to another's red-hot anger is the "end of the road." Beyond all of our feelings of inadequacy that we cannot control others – or whether we feel inadequate to remain close through another's expression of anger or feel inadequate to stand by another in some effort to facilitate and support helpful change within one's personality and relationships – (beyond all our feelings of inadequacy) exist the possibilities of God's new life dawning! In the Bible story we've read – and going on to the end of chapter 32, the storytellers argue that there are consequences to the people's unfaithfulness: Moses compels the people to drink water flavored with the melted-down gold. They become sick. God tells the Levite tribe to slay with a sword anyone within reach who danced before the golden calf statue. God is said then to send a plague upon those who survived the sword massacre. I think that's an unfortunate characterization of God. Honestly, I'm stopping on this story with the understanding that "there are consequences to our unfaithfulness," to our unwillingness to offer tenacious, respectful care to one another, which is necessary if we seek to experience reform and transformation in the dynamics of our personalities and relationships. That may include laboring for constructive public policy as citizens of a community or nation understand how change is essential. It can include creating support where we personally interact with one another and even sense how we have substantial differences and conflicting opinions.

Will our outbursts of anger and the unhelpful responses to such outbursts keep us living in a landfill or garbage pile of our inadequate feelings amid what goes on unchanged and unhealthy? Or might we see through the inadequacies of one another to where the landfills and garbage piles of human fault and failure – which we can think we prefer because they exist without any sustained effort on our part - and become convinced that landfills and garbage piles of fault and failure – in God's will – become compost piles fertilizing trust in God's abiding, steadfast faithfulness and creating transforming possibilities within and among one and all? There certainly are consequences to our unfaithfulness; yet God leads us beyond every camp where our golden calves are sadly imagined and futilely enjoyed. God leads us to realize greater possibilities as we are transformed beyond our inadequacies for holy, healthier life together.

Perhaps no one has said it better than poet James Weldon Johnson, whose words were set to music by the tune his wife composed, in stanza 3: "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way; Thou who hast by thy might led us into the light, keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee; lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee; shadowed beneath thy hand may we forever stand, true to our God, true to our native land." – All honor and praise be to God.