

Restoring the Dead Branch: God's work, not ours

Christina Reimer, April 2, 2017

Scripture Readings – (Psalm 130; John 11:1-45)

During the time of the Buddha in what is now Pakistan, there lived a young man named Angulimala. He was said to have been born under a “robber star”. He was a brilliant student, but had a ferocious temper. None of the other students liked him and they plotted with his teacher to get him kicked out of the university. So his teacher came up with a ridiculous and impossible task that Angulimala would have to complete if he wanted to graduate. The task was meant to set him up for certain failure. The teacher told Angulimala that he had to bring him a thousand human fingers – and not just fingers, but only baby fingers from the right hand. Angulimala, who relished violence, managed to collect 999 fingers and he became known as a vicious killer who lived wild in the woods.

One day, the Buddha decided to practice his walking meditation in these very same woods. The other monks begged him not to go out alone, saying, “don’t you know who lives in those woods?! He will surely kill you!” But, the Buddha wasn’t afraid. Sure enough, as he was walking through the woods, he met up with Angulimala who had only one finger left to collect. But a strange thing happened. Even though the Buddha was walking very, very slowly and Angulimala was running as swiftly as he could, he could not catch up with him!

Eventually, the Buddha turned around and told Angulimala to be still. Angulimala, who was very confused at this point, stopped in his tracks. The Buddha pointed to a nearby tree and said, “cut off the branch of that tree.” Angulimala complied. Then the Buddha said, “now put the branch back on the tree.” Of course, Angulimala was unable to reconnect the branch, no matter how hard he tried. Then the Buddha said to him, “your power is so limited, you can only destroy life. What about the power to restore life?”

Angulimala then became a monk and, just over 30 years ago, a Buddhist prison chaplaincy was set up in Angulimala’s name in England.

The Buddha says, “your power is so limited, you can only destroy life. What about the power to restore life?” Why is it so easy for us to destroy life and so hard to restore it? Why is it so much easier to hurt someone than repair the damage? Why is it possible to kill but not to resurrect? Because restoring the dead branch is the work of God. Bringing Lazarus back from the dead is the work of God. Redeeming sin is the work of God.

I think that we Mennonites can sometimes forget this and try really hard to restore that branch ourselves.

When I was at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, now Canadian Mennonite University, I lived with two amazing women in an apartment on campus. It was wonderful, even though they were

both vegetarian, which was a super drag for me since we ate communally. I love meat! I remember one time we were sitting around the table together and there was just one homemade cookie left on the plate between us. They both knew that I don't like sweets, so I simply sat back and was entertained as each of them tried to convince the other to take the last cookie. "You go ahead." "No, that's okay, I want you to have it." Finally, after this went on for a while, one of my roommates told the other, "look, it's more selfish if you make me take it because you're forcing ME to be selfish which actually means that you're selfish." We joked about this conversation for a long time calling it the Mennonite Morality Olympics.

There is a famously confusing post-modern philosopher named Jacques Derrida whose work doesn't usually interest me that much because it seems like he makes it deliberately hard to understand, but I read something thought-provoking that he wrote a number of years ago about what he calls "pure morality". And it feels like he is talking to me as a Mennonite. He said, "In order to conduct oneself in a moral manner, one must act as though God does not exist or no longer concerns himself with our salvation."¹ I think what he means is that we must act morally without the expectation of reward. In other words, without the expectation of heaven. Then we can know that we are acting with the truest of intentions – with what he calls "pure morality".

Let me repeat that. "In order to conduct oneself in a moral manner, one must act as though God does not exist or no longer concerns himself with our salvation."

We might immediately react against such a definition, saying that our morality is grounded in God, but I think that Derrida's definition has a message for us. In one of his books, Mennonite theologian A. James Reimer said that Mennonites tend to reduce all of their theology to ethics. I think that there is an element of truth to this.

It seems to me that we're mostly concerned with doing the right thing and contributing to the betterment of the world. And what's wrong with that? That sounds pretty great! What could be the downside to this?

The downside is that we are sometimes in danger of seeking perfection as a community. And when we seek perfection as a realistic goal, we are in danger of imagining ourselves to be capable of self-redemption. Capable of restoring the dead branch. Doesn't faith in a redeeming God rebel against such human self-sufficiency?

Consider the way that Mennonites historically practiced communion. I did a little research on the handy online resource, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia and found out that "moral integrity, unity and peace" among church members were prerequisites for taking communion. In Mennonite centres like Switzerland, South Germany and Holland, the Sunday before communion was set aside to cleanse the congregation of misunderstandings and offenses so that all of the

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 11.

members would be right with God and their fellow congregants before partaking of the Lord's Supper. If an individual member was not capable of being cleansed, then he or she was expected to refrain from communion.² Really?! Were Mennonites expected to be morally right *before* communing with God and one another in the form of the Lord's Supper? Do we still think this way?

I had a conversation about this with Svinda Heinrichs a few weeks ago. She was telling me about her approach to presiding over communion as a United Church minister. She has a unique vantage point because she grew up as a Mennonite in our very own congregation, and is still a Mennonite, but has now become a part of this other Christian community as well.

Svinda said that this Mennonite idea of being right with God and one's neighbour in order to take communion misses the mark. When she presides over communion, she follows Jesus' example by inviting all those who are hungry to the table. She also said that Jesus never asked anyone for a confession of faith before dining with them. If prostitutes and tax collectors desired to commune with him, they were welcome.

Mennonites are very good at being hosts, but maybe we're not as good at being guests. Perhaps we find it easier to give than to receive.

But isn't it wonderful that we don't need to do anything beforehand or bring an appetizer or a dessert to the Lord's Supper? All we need to bring is our hunger and our thirst. It is Jesus who is the host – both in the sense that he receives us as his guests, and in the sense that he is the actual communion host - the bread and the wine that nourishes us body and soul. We don't need to do the work of being the best possible person before we meet with Jesus in communion. If we try to fix everything about ourselves beforehand, then we have no need of God's grace! Grace is for broken people. Grace is for empty-handed people. Grace is for screw ups like us.

The Hebrew Bible is much better about providing examples of screw ups than the New Testament. I guess that Paul did kill a few Christians, so there's that, but really, no competition for the Old Testament string of characters behaving badly.

Noah gets drunk and forgets his clothes somewhere and then curses his son for seeing him naked. Jacob is a liar and a thief. Moses is a murderer. David is a player and has his lover's husband killed and Joseph is just a show off. But my favourite is the prophet Elisha who was prone to temper tantrums – he once called on 2 she-bears to maul 42 kids because they made fun of him for being bald. Yet these guys were some of Israel's greatest rock stars! I suspect it was their faith that received favour from God - clearly not their moral perfection. And God doesn't just bestow grace on fallible individuals, but entire fallible communities! Our Psalm reading this morning says, "O Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption. He himself will redeem Israel from all of their sins."

² <http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Communion>

A few weeks back, Jeff Taylor mentioned the Thomas Jefferson translation of the Bible and its exclusion of all of Jesus' miracles. Jefferson thought of these miracles as ridiculous superstition and wanted to extract what he saw as the "pure principles" that Jesus taught. It would be an understatement to say that Jefferson was liberal in his cutting of the biblical text. He called the Trinity "mere abracadabra" and Paul the "first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus". He also called the NT writers "ignorant, unlettered men" and saw his own editing of the biblical text as a noble sorting of the "diamonds from the dunghills".

Jefferson's Jesus is really just a man with good principles – an example to be followed. But what of Jesus the miracle worker who brings Lazarus back from the dead? Jesus the miracle worker is not simply a better version of ourselves. He is categorically other than you or me. He is the one with the divine power to redeem and to bring what is dead back to life. It goes without saying that we are supposed to stumble along trying to follow Jesus' example of living with love, but we will never possess the power to restore the dead branch. That job is God's alone.

Of course, sometimes God's grace acts through human beings, but we are not the source of this grace. We are merely its instruments. And sometimes even God's miracles are enacted through human beings. Consider some of these miracles of lesser known Catholic saints. St. Denis was Bishop of Paris and martyred in the 3rd century. He was beheaded and then walked for 6 miles carrying his own head just so that he could keep preaching about repentance a little while longer. And don't forget about the Irish saint named St. Brigid, born in the 5th century, who once hung her wet laundry on a sunbeam and turned her own bathwater into beer.

But Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead. That is a next level miracle. John 11:17 reads, "on his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days". In my Bible commentary, I read that "many Jews believed that the soul remained near the body for three days after death in the hope of returning to it. If this idea was in the minds of these people, they obviously thought all hope was gone and that Lazarus was irrevocably dead". In other words, Jesus raising Lazarus on the 4th day is significantly more miraculous than doing it on the 3rd day.

Jesus restores the dead branch, not because we deserve it but because he is gracious. And what is our part in all of this? Theologian Paul Tillich once described receiving grace as "accepting our acceptance despite our unacceptability". Accepting our acceptance despite our unacceptability.³ All we need to do is accept that God accepts us, not through our own merit, but because of the nature of God.

I'd like to conclude with the conversation that Jesus has with his dear friend Martha when he first arrives at her house after her brother has died. Jesus says to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies." And then he asks her, "do you believe this"? And she says, "yes". This is sufficient for Jesus and he goes to raise Lazarus

³ See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

from the dead. So, the condition for receiving new life is not being a really good person; it is believing that God has the power to redeem us. Thank you God for this glorious gift. Amen.