

“Overcoming the Temptation to Try to Limit God”

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

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In August, 1980, Bailey Smith, who was then president of the Southern Baptist Convention, made the following inflammatory remark at the National Affairs Briefing. “It is interesting, at great political rallies, how you have a Protestant to pray, a Catholic to pray, and then you have a Jew to pray. With all due respect to those dear people, my friends, God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.”

Needless to say, the comment created quite a stir at the time, and it was that kind of spirit that led this church to leave the SBC two decades ago. But the truth is the underlying problem with Bailey Smith’s comment is something we all struggle with in one way or another. We may not agree with his exclusive perspective on salvation and prayer, but we all are tempted to try to limit God in some way.

Perhaps we think some personal situation is beyond hope. A loved one has received a feared diagnosis. There is nothing medical science or God can do. Perhaps we think some conflict is beyond any possibility of resolution. We will never forgive them or they us, even God can’t persuade us. Perhaps we think certain cultural divisions will always be with us. Racism, sexism, classism and all the other isms are part of the fabric of human experience. Nothing will change that, not even God.

Or perhaps we just think we have to control certain things in life because if we don’t, no one else will, not even God. For example, we want our children to make faith decisions early on in life because if they do not, the world may lead them astray. This perspective reveals both a genuine love for our children and a profound lack of faith in God to find a way to care for our children. There are many different ways in which we are tempted to try to limit who God is and how God can work.

But we are not the first to face this temptation. We have read two stories today wherein central characters try to limit God. In Numbers 11, Moses has had it with the whining of his people. He asks God to put him out of his misery, but rather than granting this request, God offers Moses help, people to share the load. He is to gather 70 elders and God will spread out the spirit that has been on him. Moses agrees, the people are assembled and God makes good on the promise, the 70 prophesy!

The problem is two extra people, Eldad and Medad, just happen to be there at the time, and they get the spirit too and start prophesying like the rest. Apparently God's blessing falls a bit like some smart bombs, precisely where desired but not that precisely. It is almost comical. We can imagine a group of holy ones gathering reverently to receive their blessing while two misfits – Laurel and Hardy, Laverne and Shirley, Cheech and Chong, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler – wander in and get caught up in the same experience and lo and behold they are now holy!

We might find this funny, but Joshua does not. When news arrives that unauthorized people, meaning people not chosen by the established leaders, are prophesying, Joshua says, "My lord Moses, stop them!" We can't have these people out there representing us, he says, God's blessing and empowerment is not for them. Moses disagrees. "Are you jealous for my sake?" he asks, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and the Lord would put (the) spirit on them!" Moses wants all the help he can get while Joshua wants to keep things under control, assuming that God wouldn't want to bless people Moses has not chosen.

In Mark 9, the disciple John reacts in a similar way to unauthorized ministry. Jesus has been trying to teach the twelve about his path of suffering and service, and they have been having none of it. He has taken a child into his arms and modeled the kind of humble service he has been talking about when John interrupts him with a concern he feels certain Jesus will want to know about and address.

"Teacher," he says, "we saw someone casting our demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." Like

Joshua, John wants to control things, he doesn't want any unauthorized people out there working in Jesus' name and he assumes Jesus will agree. He does not. "Do not stop him," Jesus says, "for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." Jesus leaves room for God to work through people outside his inner circle. John does not.

It is just so tempting to try to limit God in some way, to say that God can only speak through our tradition, no others; through men, not women; through people we have authorized, no one else; in the ways we expect because they fit with our previous understanding and experience. The trouble is God is who God is, God speaks through whomever God chooses and God acts in whatever ways God wants to act. As the prophet Isaiah once said, God's ways are not our ways and God's thoughts are not our thoughts (Isaiah 55:8). This is why I say we are tempted to *try* to limit God because fortunately in the end we cannot.

Career missionaries and those who participate in partnership work have discovered this over and over again. Many begin with not just a genuine desire to give witness to the love they have known in Christ but also an assumption that they are somehow taking God to people. Inevitably, they discover that God is already present wherever they go.

I heard a traditional prayer in a remote area of Kenya that was profoundly moving and deeply spiritual. It preceded the presence of any Christian missionaries. In fact, it may have preceded Christianity. God is at work in many ways beyond our capacity to understand.

Frederick Buechner put it this way (*Wishful Thinking*, p.15).

The visible church is all the people who get together from time to time in God's name. Anybody can find out who they are by going to look... The invisible church is all the people God uses for (God's) hands and feet in this world. Nobody can find out who they are except God.

Think of them as two circles. The optimist says they are concentric. The cynic says they don't even touch. The realist says they occasionally overlap.

It may sound radical, the idea that God works outside the church, but if think about it, it isn't radical at all. What would be radical would be the concept that any one group or tradition could possess God fully.

So, the question is – how do we overcome the temptation to try to limit God? It is an ongoing process, but we begin by realizing that neither God nor the church needs our protection. God can take care of God's self and the church is not as dependent on us as we think. If it were, it would have died long ago. When we try to limit God, we think we are protecting God and the church, but the truth is we harm both.

In his book *Your God Is Too Small*, published in 1952, Anglican minister J. B. Phillips details a number of ways in which we try to limit God as well as the dangers of doing so. In one section he describes the way restricting God to the church turns people off of faith (p. 38).

Of course, it's easy to leap to the defense of the Churches, and point out that every cause must be organized if it is to be effective, that every society must have its rules, that Christ Himself founded a Church, and so on. But if the Churches give the outsider the impression that God works almost exclusively through the machinery they have erected and, what is worse, damns all other machinery which does not bear their label, then they cannot be surprised if he (she) finds their version of God cramped and inadequate and refuses to 'join their union.'

How ironic it is that in trying to offer protection we only do harm.

Another thing that might help us overcome our temptation to try to limit God is to realize the benefits of letting God be God. Joshua

experiences these benefits as more people are able to help the wandering exiles make their way to the Promised Land. John experiences these benefits as the early church grows because the Spirit is poured out on many, not just a chosen few. We are blessed by the companionship of others we didn't know could help - other church members, other Baptists and other Christians, even people of other faiths - as we build Habitat Houses and respond to natural disasters, to name just two examples.

We also benefit from the insights of others who have experienced God in a different way. This might mean through a different aspect of human experience like art or nature. It might mean through a different culture like in Kenya or Honduras. Or it might mean through a different denomination or even world religion.

To make room for the latter is not to relativize or equate all approaches to faith. We experience God in a distinctive way in Christ and have a calling to give witness to this distinctive experience. But have we not learned things about God and our own faith when we have studied common texts with Jewish friends or examined the story of the proposed sacrifice of Isaac with Jewish and Muslim friends? Hearing another perspective is enlightening and knowing that others encounter the Holy is encouraging, not threatening, at least not to authentic faith.

One thinks of the old jokes about Baptists in heaven living behind a wall because they think they are the only ones there. It is not a joke to some people. They think they are the only ones who will make it to heaven. They act like they don't even want to go if others get to do so. It's difficult to imagine anything more contrary to the Gospel. God's love is not limited. Our faith is not threatened by the faith of others.

So, we don't need to protect God or the church, but we do benefit from allowing God to be God, and then it might help us to realize that any attempt to limit God is a form of idolatry. It is one thing to develop certain ideas about the character of God, based on the character of Christ, for example that God is gracious and kind, loving and just. It is fine to develop images of God as Father or Mother, Shepherd or Rock,

as a means of helping us relate to the Holy. Only a few mystics can connect with God directly without the aid of images and ideas.

But to equate any of our ideas and images with God is by definition idolatry. Any God we can fully define, grasp or image, is no longer God at all, which is why our image of God needs to be ever open and expanding without giving up our core convictions.

In his book *Words I Wish I Wrote* (p.179) Robert Fulghum includes the following reflection upon his faith journey.

In the credo I wrote at age twenty-one, the longest part was devoted to God... It was a Supreme Court appeal against the existence of the Sunday-school version of the deity imposed on me in childhood. On reading my fiercely argued case, one professor said that not only had I thrown the baby out with the bathwater, but I had thrown out the soap and towel and bathtub as well – and then tried to burn down the bathroom while I was at it. Deconstruction without construction. Was there nothing, he asked, that might replace what I had so thoroughly rejected? At the time, the answer was NO, absolutely not.

Now, in this present credo... I see many layers of paint applied over that NO. Visible are faint remnants of a design for an accommodation with the idea of God as I have struggled for a self-portrait of my soul. I could construct an existential roadmap marking the long distances traveled and the varied destinations visited in search of a reconciliation with an unrelenting yearning to settle something in my mind once and for all.

It reminds me of something our beloved professor and friend Elmo Scoggin said to me near the end of his life. He said, “The longer I live, the less I believe.” He hadn’t lost his faith. He had given up certainty and a number of limiting propositions about God. He realized the Infinite and Holy One is actually Infinite and Holy. We do well to follow Elmo as we seek to overcome the temptation to try to limit God.