

Hold it Gently
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I watched a movie called *Fish Out of Water* this week, which is about negative attitudes toward non-hetero-sexual folks, and where all those ideas come from. One source, of course, is our own beloved Bible. Accordingly, a number of religious professionals were interviewed for the movie. Some of them were Bible scholars like Amy Jill-Levine and Bishop John Shelby Spong, and others were pastors from a variety of denominations. Most of the folks interviewed seemed surprised or even outraged that so much anti-gay sentiment had been historically connected to the Bible. After all, there only eight sections in the whole Bible which are traditionally used to decry homosexuality. There are five in the Hebrew Scriptures and three in the Christian Scriptures, and *none* of them come from Jesus. By any assessment, it is a small minority of the verses and chapters of the big Book.

Yet, among the religious professionals, two folks were consistently anti-gay. One person was new to me, but the other has practically built his career on preaching against lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender, questioning, queer and intersex people. I bet you have heard of him, too. His name is Fred Phelps. He has a website and *a whole ministry* called God Hates Fags. Right there in the middle of the name is hate. Not hope, or faith, or joy, or new life, or love, but hate...Which is kind of fitting, because if there is one thing that Fred modeled throughout his interviews it was certainly hate.

When he was talking he was angry, and he kept veering off from whatever question he was asked into a diatribe against gay people full of attacks and questionable language. It seemed like no matter what was asked of him, he held tight to a preconceived notion of where the conversation *should* go, and the things that *must* be said against gay people. He held his understanding of God with a clenched fist, and any attempt to question it was an affront to the right understanding, which needed to be beaten back and flatly denied. There was no room for his understanding of God to grow or change. He was too busy holding onto it with a death grip, like it was a club or a sword he wielded against any other view.

Which, frankly, I just don't understand. Now, I will own that this could well be my own growing edge. We all have them. Part of the reason it is hard for me to understand is that it seems clear to me that we get quite different views of God throughout scripture, and especially in the person of Jesus Christ. Whenever Jesus shows up things change and transform and grow. Water gets turned to wine. The sick are healed. The dead return to life. Broken relationships are restored. God and humanity are reconciled. When Jesus shows up there is always something

surprising or amazing or new that happens. Which demonstrates clearly that our living, and still speaking, God is on the move and open to new things.

Today's scripture drives this point home for me. In the very first verse we get a new heaven and a new earth, and the sea is no more. God is on the move and working transformation! The second verse has the holy city, the new Jerusalem descend from heaven to earth. God is on the move! Then a loud voice announces that "the home of God is among mortals,"¹ and not only that, but God is loving us and caring for us remarkably—wiping our tears away, taking away death and suffering, reconciling earth and heaven; changing and transforming *everything*.

And the vision gets more beautiful as today's reading continues. In the very center of the new Jerusalem a bright, crystalline river flows, bringing the water of life to *all*. There is a tree of life that bears a different kind of fruit each month, and heals the nations with its leaves. God is on the move—people heal and prosper! Nothing accursed can even be found in the city, and people behold the very face of God, surrounded day and night by the light of God and the Lamb. No one needs lamps or the sun because God shines among everyone. It is a beautiful vision of a loving God. God is on the move and actively *creating* new things!

Now, the usual interpretation of the book of Revelation is that it is predicting events that are yet to come. But such an interpretation isn't faithful to what revelation actually means. Like the other word for this book—apocalypse—revelation means that something is revealed, not that something is predicted. By using fanciful language, dream images, beauty, and an array of potent symbols, the book of Revelation shows us how life really is just below the surface. A close read of this morning's texts shows us many dream-like images. Here they are at a trot—we have a new heaven and a new earth; the sea is gone; an entire city descends from the sky; this new city is adorned like a bride for her husband; the singular tree of life grows on either side of the river of life; there is no need of a lamp or even the sun.

These images can leave us asking all sorts of logistical questions. Where did the old heaven and old earth go? Did the sea evaporate? How can a city materialize from the sky? How exactly can a city dress like a woman? How can one tree of life be in one of two places? Does not *needing* the sun mean it goes out? Wouldn't that end life as we know it?

These are useful questions only if we take the images of Revelation to be literally true, rather than symbolic of a deeper truth. To my faith that is holding too tightly to our understanding of Scripture. It is demanding literal truth from an ecstatic love poem written with, about, and for a loving God. I think it is downright dangerous to view scripture that way. Sadly, this has often

¹ Revelation 21:3a-b.

been the way that the Bible has been used through the last century or two: as a club or a sword wielded against any other view.

In light of recent events, I am reminded that one particular scripture passage has been used far too literally for far too long; Genesis 1:28:

God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue it*; and *have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.*’

We humans have had a death grip on that passage that has allowed us to greatly diminish the Amazon rainforest, pollute rivers, lakes and oceans, strip mine, and drill oil with wild abandon. Do you suppose that if we had collectively held on to that scripture passage a little more gently that we might have thought about making a backup plan for oil spills after the one in Santa Barbara in 1969 which inspired the first Earth Day? Here we are forty one years later, just now improvising domes to surround a massive outpouring of oil from underground. Haven’t we been here before? Why don’t we have a plan yet?

Imagine if we had clung hard to Christ’s call to love God with the same fervor instead. Would we so readily poison the planet God made? Imagine if Fred Phelps, and others like him, grabbed on hard to Christ’s call to help the poor, which Jesus repeats again and again along with the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures rather than the eight or so slim passages which speak against people who love differently than they do. Would Phelps so readily limit the circumference of God’s circle of grace to folks like him? Or might he realize that God’s love is wider than his? And wider than ours, too, of course.

We need a gentler way to hold God’s truth so that we can all see more of it together. We need to leave room for other views to co-exist with our own. When we build strict limitations around how God works, we limit the still-speaking God’s ability to surprise us and usher us into new understandings and growth. God’s truth is like a butterfly: often elusive, strikingly beautiful, and something to hold gently. In part so we don’t limit it, diminish it, or crush it in our zeal; but also—and just as importantly—so that it continues to flutter and dance and beautify not just in our lives, but in others’, too. When we hold so tightly to our view of God that we discriminate against others or harm the earth we limit our ability to experience God completely, and cut ourselves out of relationship with God’s creation, God’s creature and even with God.

God’s truth is not a sword, or a club, or a weapon. It was revealed among us to bring people together, not to push them apart—to reconcile, not to tear asunder. We need to hold God’s truth gently so God has ample room to stay on the move, and to keep transforming our sorrow into joy, and to keeping bringing heaven and earth together. When we let God’s truth beautify and dance through our lives we grow the eyes of faith which see the new Jerusalem coming to earth

right now. Through the suffering and pain in our lives and others we will suddenly see the river of life flowing through the middle of everything, not just some day, but *right now!* The tree of life will be in our midst *right now* and ready to be partaken of. God is on the move, transforming, reconciling and renewing all creation, and God wants us to join in that work. God wants you to join in that work. And you. And Fred Phelps. And all the world. And that's the good news of Revelation this morning. God's truth is waiting for us to claim it *right now*. Hold it gently!

Amen.

Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-5

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

22 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. 3 Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; 4 they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.