

The Face of God

This sermon is based on a vanity card by Chuck Lorre. This, of course, brings up two questions. Who is Chuck Lorre, and what is a vanity card? As to the first question, Chuck Lorre is the creator and producer of a number of successful TV shows including *Dharma and Greg*, *Mike and Molly*, *Two and a Half Men*, and (my children's favorite) *The Big Bang Theory*. A vanity card is that image that the producer gets to show for several seconds at the end of a TV show. Mary Tyler Moore used to have a meowing cat; David Letterman has "Worldwide Pants." Other vanity cards you might have seen include "Sit Ubu Sit" or "Friends of Garcia". Chuck Lorre uses his vanity cards to share messages with his viewers about his thoughts on the world. Now for reasons that aren't important here, I was browsing Chuck Lorre's vanity cards one day and I came across one – number 240, which read

A wise man once told me that we are all God in drag. I like that. Sometimes when I'm in a public place or sitting at a stoplight, I'll watch people walking by and I'll silently say to myself, "He's God. She's God. He's God. She's God." Before long I always find myself feeling a warm sense of affinity for these strangers. The experience is even more powerful when I do this while observing a person who is clearly suffering.

As I pondered this vanity card, I immediately realized that I was looking at a Jewish concept –that we are the Face of God. Sacredness is present in each of us. The idea of humanity's holiness is certainly not a Christian construct. Christians seem to consider people as tainted, sinful constructs of flesh. Holiness is not considered to be inherent within us. In the Christian religion, it takes an act of God in the form of Jesus's salvation to save us, to redeem us, to clean us. This Christian idea of hereditary depravity (and for those of you who haven't read much theology, hereditary depravity is the actual term used), this idea of hereditary depravity is often blamed on Calvin, but in actuality it can be traced back to St. Augustine and his idea of original sin. The idea that man's very nature is corrupt permeates all branches of Christianity and not just Calvinism, but that is the topic of another talk and not one I am particularly interested in giving.

Shortly after I read Chuck Lorre's vanity card, I came across an article in the Huffington Post that was written by the Rabbi Joshua Levine Grater. In this article he wrote about going to a sermon by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. In this sermon Archbishop Tutu preached that God is holy, therefore we are all holy. That since we were made in the image of God, we were a piece of God, and that we all deserved respect, dignity, compassion and love. Archbishop Tutu also preached that we had become desensitized to the idea of Holiness and he went on to ask the following question

"...what the world would be like if we all believed, truly believed, the words of our respective scriptures, the words that we hear in synagogue, church, mosque, shrine, or other "places of worship," that tell us this week in and week out. Would we kill one another, would

we hate one another, would we destroy one another, if we truly believed the words of our tradition? Would we kill others if we believed it was killing a part of God every time?"

The concept that we are the "Face of God," that we are holy is found in Leviticus 19. Now most of us don't read Leviticus. Let's face it. It's rather boring, and it really doesn't pertain to us in this day and age. Leviticus contains a set of rules that tells the Jewish people what they can eat, how to deal with lepers, how to cut your hair and beard, how to buy and sell real estate, how to treat slaves, and even when to have sex. (Frankly the list goes on and on). Leviticus is a rather restrictive treatise on how to treat others fairly, honestly and respectfully. But it tells us nothing about how to be Holy. For that we need Leviticus 19, the part of the Torah called the Holiness Code. This is the part of the Bible that tells us how to be Holy; it tells us that we are, in fact, already Holy, that every person who walks the face of the earth, and that has ever walked the face of the earth, is and was created to show the world the Divine nature. Leviticus 19:1-2 reads

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Leviticus 19 tells us that we are holy when we forgive one another, for there is no law against holding a grudge; that we are holy when we do not insult one another, for there is no law against insults; that we are holy when we leave our gleanings for the poor, for there is no law against harvesting all our crops; that we are holy when we do not place obstructions in front of a blind person, for there is no laws against moving furniture; and that we are holy when we do not hate another, for there is no law against hating.

Now I promised that I would tie this sermon into UU principles. A few years back, a survey was taken where UU's were asked to name as many of the seven principles of our faith as they could. Most UU's could only name one or two principles. Not exactly a passing grade, but I won't make fun of them because I probably would have failed too. But there was one principle that every UU could name, and that was the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: "The inherent worth and dignity of every person." This appears to be the most basic and important of all of our principles. Now it would seem that recognizing the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" would be similar to recognizing the Sacredness in every person. But it is really not. Worth and dignity are secular words, not spiritual words. Worth in particular bothers me because it is such a quantitative word. The worth of jellybean is not the same as the worth of a standing rib roast. The worth of a fingernail is not the same as the worth of a hand. The worth of something also changes depending on the circumstances and on who is doing the measuring. A glass of water has a lot more worth to a person who is lost in the desert, than it does to a person who is sitting next to a stream. Furthermore, the first principle states that all persons have "worth and dignity," not that all persons have the same "worth and dignity".

So people having inherent “worth and dignity” is not the same as people having inherent Holiness. When people have worth and dignity, we acknowledge them; we respect them; we admire them. It is similar to Leviticus. It is a guideline for how to treat people fairly and respectfully. When we consider people Holy, we celebrate them; we worship them; we love them. And when we love, we don’t love the idea of a person, the concept of a person, the image of a person; we don’t love humanity as a whole. No, we love the person as an individual, in his/her entirety. Acknowledging the worth and dignity of someone is an intellectual exercise. It engages the brain. We do not necessarily have to care. We just have to be fair and respectful. But acknowledging the holiness of someone is a spiritual process. It engages the feelings, the emotions, the soul. Acknowledging solely a person’s worth and dignity allows you to maintain your distance. Acknowledging a person’s holiness forces you to become intimate, to care, to love. If you see the sacredness in another, could you hurt them, knowing that you are, in fact, hurting God?

Now I am going to address the following issue, because I know that if I don’t now, it is going to be brought up during the discussion. In this congregation I have heard someone question the validity of the first principle, question whether every person has “worth and dignity.” Inevitable Hitler gets brought up. I don’t know why it is always Hitler who gets brought up. Stalin and Mao Ze Dong killed far more people than Hitler, but it is always Hitler. In this very room, I have heard it questioned if Hitler had any inherent “worth and dignity.” Part of the problem here is that “worth” is a quantitative quality and may be different based on who is measuring. Holiness, on the other hand, is non-quantitative. You are either Holy or you are not (it’s a little like being pregnant). And since this is my sermon, I am going to change the question to whether every person is Holy rather than whether every person has “worth and dignity.”

So is Hitler no longer Holy because he killed 12 million people? So is Stalin no longer Holy because he killed 25 million people? So is Mao Ze Dong no longer Holy because he killed – well no one is quite sure how many people were killed, but it was enough to make Hitler and Stalin look like slackers? Let’s examine this on a smaller scale. Is the robber who killed a shop owner no longer Holy, because he killed? Is the policeman who shot another person in self-defense no longer Holy, because he met violence with violence? Is the shoplifter no longer Holy because he stole? Is Elliot no longer Holy because he kicked his brother in anger? Is Payson no longer holy because he refuses to change his clothes? Is Alex no longer Holy because he lied to me about practicing his guitar? Am I no longer Holy, because I get angry and yell at my children? When do the acts and deeds of a person become so wrong that a person can no longer be considered Holy? And, frankly, who gets to do the deciding of which sins are horrible enough that the person is no longer Divine? Certainly not me - I don’t want that job, and I would be wary of anyone who did want that job. Basically, if you deny the Holiness of one person, you deny the Holiness of all persons. This bears repeating. If you deny the Holiness of one person, you deny the Holiness of everyone. The Christians decided to solve this dilemma by denying the Holiness of everyone. Universalists decided to resolve this dilemma by believing that everyone is Holy, but only after death. Leviticus 19,

however, tells us to worship the Holiness of everyone, in life as well as in death.

I would like to return to the article that Rabbi Grater wrote about Archbishop Tutu's sermon. In this article, the Rabbi wrote that

"After 20+ minutes of his sermon, which kept everyone rapt in attention, Tutu said, again, we are all God carriers, God's stand-ins, God's viceroys. Then he said, "Even Mubarak." The Palestinians, the Jews, Americans, Arabs, South Africans, all of us are God carriers. And that is the hard lesson he was driving at, which he said explicitly at the end. It is easy to love those similar to you, to love those you already love. To be holy, to be God carriers, he said, is to love those you don't like, even those you hate. To find the spark of holiness, the spark of God, in every person, in every human being."

And that is what I want you to do. I want everyone here to look for the Holiness in each person. To look at one another and say that is the Face of God. That is the Face of Love. To remember that each person is holy and each person is deserving of our love. Now I am not asking you to go whole hog and decide that you must become intimately involved in actively loving each person on earth, even those you have not met. I am not asking you to deliberately give up your lives materially, physically, mentally, and emotionally for the service of others. That would be too much, too fast, and, frankly, none of us would be successful at doing that. I just want you to do the first step. When you are in a good mood, walk around and focus on the people that you see and say to yourself. "He is God." "She is God." "That is what God looks like." I can guarantee that you will not be able to do this without smiling at each person that you see. You will be filled with warm feelings towards all these persons. You, yourself, will feel happier and more connected with other people. That is the easy exercise. A much harder task is to look for the Face of God when you are in a foul mood, when you are tired and cranky. To look at the person who has just cut you off in traffic, to look at that child who is viciously arguing with you, to look at your boss or coworker who refuses to listen to your ideas, to look at all these people and say, "This is the Face of God." This is much harder task, but one that will allow the Holiness in them and the Holiness in you to shine through. We are all the "Face of God."

Before I wrap up this sermon, I would like to warn you not to go reading Chuck Lorre's vanity cards in an effort to find spiritual enlightenment. You will be very disappointed. When I told you about vanity card #240 at the beginning of the sermon, I didn't exactly read the entire card. So in ending I will read card #240 in its entirety.

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even more powerful when I do this while observing a person who is clearly suffering. On occasion I'll test my little spiritual practice by turning on Fox News. Within minutes I become an atheist.