

God and Big-Tomato Theology

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, June 21, 2009.

“Lord, don’t you even care that we’re about to die?” Jesus wakes up, stills the wind and the storm, and shows he cares. What a wonderful proof that God loves us, that God would calm a storm, or give us victory in battle against the Philistines, or give us success in whatever we do, when we pray to God for help.

This idea got me thinking about a Sunday School lesson I saw once. The lesson was about the power of prayer. Apparently somewhere in a big city, a neighborhood group took down a parking lot in the middle of the city and turned it into a large plot of land. They divided the land into a bunch of little plots and let people grow tomatoes on their plots. Then a Christian group had the idea that some of their folk would pick a random number of little plots and each one would pray over one of the plots. At the end of the season, so the lesson goes, the plots that had been prayed over had bigger tomatoes than the plots that didn’t have the benefit of prayer.

Now, leaving aside my discomfort over violating the command in Deuteronomy, “*You shall not put the Lord your God to the test,*” this little Sunday School lesson got me wondering what children would learn about God, and about what God thinks of them. If you’re really good, do you end up with the biggest tomatoes of all? If your tomato plant looks a little scraggly, does that mean God doesn’t love you enough? How big are the tomatoes in your garden? Are you worried enough about your tomato plant yet, if it looks like your very salvation depends on it? Of course not. So here’s the real question: Does God really care about how big our tomatoes are? What does God have to do with the success of our garden plots, our battles with the Philistines of our lives, and our weather patterns? Does God give success to those God favors and dole out failure to the others?

You may be skeptical about a God-and-tomatoes theology, but big-tomato theology is not all that unusual. And no wonder. The Bible is full of stories in which God rewards those whom God loves, with success in battle, or safe passage from danger, or miraculous recovery from sickness. Look, for example, at the story of David’s rise to power and Saul’s downfall. Years ago, the people of Israel clamored for a king, and so God, under pressure, so to speak, agrees to have Saul anointed king over Israel. But God doesn’t like Saul much—never has—and so has just had Samuel secretly anoint the boy David to be king. David then goes on to kill the giant Goliath as an early sign of his future successes. The story then says that God has rejected Saul as king, and that God has departed from Saul, but that “David had success in all his undertakings, for the Lord was with him.” We don’t even blink when we hear that. From the perspective of the writer, God loves David, and so David gets the biggest tomatoes.

Does God give us success? What do we expect of God? Is God a sort of ATM of divine favors and good times, a ticket for guaranteed passage of safety if we have faith? This might seem silly, but hey, it was a lesson in a popular Sunday School curriculum

and taught to thousands of children (though I vetoed its use during my tenure there). Furthermore, even as adults we find this kind of expectation or hope all the time, maybe in a little more subtle form. During the hurricane, my house was saved from flooding because God was with me. I thank God that when I still have my job even when my co-workers are being laid off. I ask God to bring some miracle to see me through my financial, or emotional, or relational troubles.

One trouble with this “God on my side” theology, this “health and wealth” theology, is that it doesn’t look very kindly at those who weren’t so fortunate. What about one who lost his job because his bank failed? Does God not love him? David was successful in battle because God loved him. What about the kind and moral Philistine who is caring for three generations and just wants to go home and farm his little plot of land? Did God reject him?

But the bigger problem with this kind of thinking is what it says about God. When the windstorm starts to swamp the boat, the disciples complain to Jesus, “Don’t you even care that we’re about to die?” Jesus then calms the storm and scolds the wind. Then he turns around and scolds the disciples, who probably deserved it more. “Do you *still* not have faith?”

The usual lesson we get from this story is that Jesus—God—stills our storms, and that we do well to believe and have faith in Jesus calming presence. But this interpretation is puzzling. It’s clear that Jesus does NOT necessarily wipe away the storms in our lives. God does NOT go around fixing things for us, even when we pray for God to do that, even though God loves us. It seems more likely that Jesus was scolding the disciples for doubting that Jesus didn’t care about them. He didn’t scold them for doubting that he would command the wind to stop blowing and the clouds to stop dumping rain on them. After all, many of us have faith in God, and God loves us, we know—and our basements still flood, and sickness still comes to our bodies, and our stocks and pensions fall just as much as everybody else’s.

Call this the tough love of a father, if you will, and also the divine grace of a father. On Father’s Day, it may be comforting for fathers and those who have a father’s love to know that love and success don’t go hand in hand. We don’t have to be perfect to deserve our heavenly Father’s love. And when we’re not perfect, God loves us anyway. Neither do we need to test God’s love by the successes in our lives. Yes, God loves David—and God also loves Saul. God loves the disciples, and the skeptics, the Israelites, and the Philistines, and everybody in between. But God’s love is not about fixing things for us. It’s not about rebuking and erasing the storms in our lives. God is rather about loving us, no matter what happens, and being right there with us, giving us strength to bear our burdens and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to deal with them in a godly and righteous manner. In this way, God calms us in the midst of our storms and battles—win or lose, and even when our tomatoes are only average. Isn’t that just like a father?