

Supersize It

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by Carol Penner

Texts: I Corinthians 13, Isaiah 40:12, 28-31, Job 12:7-10

Many of you know this chapter from I Corinthians because it's quoted so often. I want to focus on verses 11 and 12 at the end of this chapter: *When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

Now if I had never heard these verses until today, and had to ascribe them to someone in the New Testament, I am not sure I would choose the Apostle Paul. Paul is so assertive, and so direct, and so certain in many of the things he writes. Here we see him having a moment of clear humility. Apart from the certainty of love, he admits that his knowledge is incomplete.

This morning I want to muse a bit on the limits of our knowledge about God, and what that means for us today.

What does it mean to think like a child? I have a very clear memory from when my daughter was around two and a half years old. We had a little toy, a red car about ten centimeters high, with doors that opened. I remember watching her playing on the living room floor. She opened the door to the car, she stood up, and then she stepped on the car. She did this over and over and over again, positioning her foot a little bit different each time, pointing her toe, and aiming it at the open door of the car. It suddenly dawned on me that she was trying to get into the car.

It wasn't till much later that I came across an explanation of this, by psychologist Judy DeLoache at the University of Virginia. She did studies on two and three year olds. She discovered that in a young child's brain the part of the brain that recognizes objects and what they are, does not yet communicate well with the different part of the brain that controls motor movement and how to interact with objects. And so there is this period of time in a child's development where they make what is called "scale errors." A scale error happens when they don't take into account the size of the thing, as they plan their actions. It's a limitation of the brain that we eventually grow out of as adults. You could call it "thinking like a child."

As human beings we are bound to make "scale errors" when it comes to God, because our knowledge is incomplete. We see this in theology. A view of God is extremely important in the church...several centuries later, the church realizes that maybe that wasn't as big and important as they thought it was. Conversely, something considered a little theological issue for a thousand years suddenly looms large. We can see this in our own lives as well. As we grow older and more mature, we come to realize that we have made scale errors. Things about God that we thought were huge and certain, we eventually see, are not so central. Sometimes we

can't fit our brain into the little way we used to think about God. Or too often we underestimate God's power, or God's reach.

Our reading today from the prophet Isaiah is trying to correct the scale errors of the Israelites. Isaiah was writing to the Israelites in Babylon. They have been in exile from their land for seventy years – that's almost three generations. The people who walked out of Jerusalem to Babylon have almost all died, it's their children, and their children's children, who are trying to make sense of God in a foreign land. What does it mean to sing songs of Zion in Babylon? Isaiah writes to them about God, whose power is vastly bigger than anything they can imagine. God is so big that the palm of God's hand can hold all the waters of the earth; God can measure the weight of the mountains. While Babylon seems to be all-powerful and all-ruling, to God the nations are like a drop in a bucket. It's this God who has not forgotten the Israelites in exile, who will comfort them. Isaiah tells them to take heart because it is not their own strength that will sustain them, but the strength of this God whose knowledge is unsearchable.

“...but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:30, 31)

When I was a teenager, my sister gave me a copy of the New Testament that had been translated by J.B. Phillips. I loved that translation and later when I came across a book by J.B. Phillips, called Your God is too Small, I was eager to read it. I think JB was the first person to talk about “God in a box.” He observes that there is a human tendency to try to put God into little human-made boxes with labels on them. We've got God cased. Once God is boxed, God is easy to control and manipulate. JB observes that we are trying to capture and tame God. JB encouraged scripture readers to fling wide the doors and windows of their minds. (from J.B. Phillips, Your God is Too Small, p. 22 and p. 41

[http://thecommonlife.com.au/books/Your God is Too Small.pdf](http://thecommonlife.com.au/books/Your_God_is_Too_Small.pdf)

This morning I want to share three stories of ways that I have caught myself making scale errors in my faith. These stories show how the narrowness of my thinking about God has been challenged. I'm not sharing these stories because they are the most profound stories ever, but simply because they are my stories. I hope that by sharing my stories, I will encourage you to think about ways that your concepts or understandings of God have been challenged.

The first story happened just this past week while I was attending the Native Assembly in Winnipeg. It was a gathering of aboriginal Christians from across North America, who come together to talk about their faith in God the Creator. It's a biennial convention sponsored by Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA. I listened to speaker after speaker, and over and over they talked about the identity of everything in the world. Not just the identity of human beings, but the identity of the ground, the identity of the water, the identity of the air, the identity of rainbow trout, and that God works through all these things.

During one workshop, we went on a learning tour to the Forks in Winnipeg, where the Red and Assiniboine Rivers meet. There is a new national museum of human rights that will be opening there soon. Our guide was Clarence Nepinak, an elder in the Pine Creek First Nation, and he told how when they were saying a traditional blessing at the groundbreaking of this site, a fawn came walking up from the river. Not only that, an eagle flew overhead, and they heard crickets even though it was not the time of year for crickets. He said that was a sign from the Creator, that what they were doing was a good thing.

These aboriginal elders aren't talking in a poetic or metaphorical way, they believe this to be true in a deep way, and they challenge Western settler people to listen to the earth. The theme of the conference was "Ears to Earth, Eyes to God." What is the earth saying to us? What is the air saying? What is the water saying? How is this the voice of God speaking to us?

I've grown up as a Mennonite, and that is a pretty foreign concept to me. We were never taught to think that God controlled the animals, or that water could talk to us. Weather is weather and animals are animals, and God is God. They aren't particularly related, except that at one point God made them and they are beautiful, and so we should thank God for these things. The scripture theme for the conference was Job 12:7-10.

But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the LORD has done this?
In his hand is the life of every living thing
and the breath of every human being.

Having doors and windows of your mind flung open is not always very comfortable; it can be drafty and unsettling! I left the conference thinking about the God box in my mind. Up to this point there was an entirely separate box in my mind labeled "nature." What doors and windows need to be flung open as I listen to my aboriginal brothers and sisters?

Second story. A few years ago I taught a class with the subject "Church and Ministry." It was a class for people going into ministry, and one of the assignments included sharing about their own call to ministry. One student brought a crack pipe into class. She held it up and said that crack was the Lord of her life for a long time, she smoked crack several times a day for months and months, and that was all she could think about. Her whole life revolved around drugs. And one day when she was at a very low point, her friend told her about Jesus, and she prayed and asked Jesus to become Lord of her life. And that was exactly what happened. And from that day on she never had any desire to smoke crack, she never had any signs of withdrawal or physical effects. Period.

I don't have a long background in addictions but that story didn't fit any categories I've heard. I have talked to people who have been addicted to alcohol or drugs and it's a long journey to quit, often with many false starts and stops. There are physiological realities to drug addiction, and crack cocaine is a very addictive substance. How do you put that together with a sudden change like the one the student in my class described? Does God work that way?

I have heard similar stories regarding cancer, where cancer just suddenly disappears after people pray for healing. That is not the experience of many very faithful praying Christians, who live with cancer, and die of cancer, or who have to go through long and painful treatments to eradicate cancer. And it's not the experience of many people who are chained to dreadful addictions and pray for deliverance. How does God work in our bodies? What does it mean to have God as Lord of our life?

Talking to people like the student in my class challenges the way I think about God, and how God works. People have told me that God works in ways that are entirely larger and more dramatic than I could ever expect. Is that what God is like? Have I made a scale error here?

The third and final story happened a few years ago. My stepmother went through a health crisis. In a period of a few months she had a urinary infection, two falls, two broken hips, and two operations for hip replacements. She went from being in her right mind and living in her own apartment, to living in a nursing home, confined to a wheelchair, and not in her right mind. She not only wasn't making sense when she talked, she seemed to be losing the ability to talk. She lost the ability to tell time, she became extremely depressed and anguished. She became convinced that the nurses were trying to kill her and she became aggressive and combative. She was desperately unhappy.

As the person who walked beside her all these months, there was a time where I kept hoping for the best. I am a pretty optimistic person, and I kept thinking that things could get better. Her doctor told me she had either dementia or Alzheimer's and that she was going to continue on this downward spiral. Month after month went by and after over a year where every time I visited her she was unhappy and miserable, I began to seriously question the quality of life that she was experiencing. And it was taking its toll on me too...I would try and cheer her up when I was visiting her, but her anguish was contagious and I often cried as I walked out of the building after a visit with her.

In my relationship with God, my prayers for healing changed over time to prayers for release. These became more clearly articulated over time. "Please let her die, please take her home, please end her life." Those were my prayers. I wrote these two poems out of that dark time, titled Dementia 1 and Dementia 2.

Dementia 1

Crippled by a mind
that sees menace in every corner
and malice in every look,
the anguished soul cries, "No more."
At the last,
her sigh a white flag,
cheek resting on her hand,
weary beyond measuring,
she murmurs,
"Maybe this is a dream.
That is what we can hope for,
that this is all a dream."
God, look upon this resignation
and in your mercy grant release.

Dementia 2

Today I'm praying for one
imprisoned in their own mind,
locked behind bars of anguish
that no key can open.
Are you the God of the disordered mind?
Do you watch as ropes of anxiety
already tight pull tighter still,
making death seem a sweet release?
When being is misery, Lord,
the gift of life is torture.
God of this dark day
the salvation we seek
is a quiet still heart.

I knew that God could only do one thing to help the situation. But now, looking back four years later, I tell a different story. My mother did not have Alzheimer's or dementia. I am not sure what the problem was, but the fact was that slowly she got better. After well over a year of being out of her mind, slowly she came into her right mind. Today she is sharp as a tack, healthy as a horse. She doesn't have any pain. She is still confined to a wheelchair, but she is almost entirely independent in the nursing home where she lives. In fact, I would say that I have never seen my mother so happy as these past few years in the nursing home.

I had a scale by which God could help us, and it turns out that scale was puny. God's scale went far beyond anything I could ask or imagine. And so I am only thankful that God does not always answer our prayers. The scale of God's healing power is beyond my sight.

We see scale errors made by many of the characters in the Bible. Moses can't imagine that God is big enough to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, and he is sure that he knows his own capabilities. He can't conceive that God could strengthen someone as powerless as he is. Jonah can't imagine that God could love Nineveh.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”(Isaiah 40:28) When the might of the religious and political powers put Jesus to death on a cross, the disciples were convinced that this was the end. There was nothing God could do now. A scale error again, because our understanding fails us: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”(I Corinthians 13:12)

I invite you this week, and in our coffee time after church today, to talk to one another about times where you have made scale errors about God. Can you think of an event or a situation which challenged your view of God? Did you embrace or resist that change in your thinking?

The upshot of these conversations is that we cultivate a sense of humility as individuals and as a church. Have you judged what you think God can do in a messy situation you are in? Maybe you are making a scale error. God is still trying to fling wide the doors and windows of our mind, surprising us by joy and hope when all we have is sorrow and despair.

Maybe this week we will be challenged by the Spirit giving us a new and unexpected insight into a very familiar passage of scripture. Or as we converse with a neighbor, we will see Jesus’ face in a context where we never expected to meet him. Or maybe one evening, as you take a quiet walk, the river will whisper some words from the Creator into your ear.

The same goes for our church. We may have a box in our mind with the words “Lendrum Church” on it. We have measured it out, the success we want to see. My prayer is that God will fling wide the doors and windows of our collective imagination. Who knows what God can do?