

Can We Trust an Unknowable God?

I'm from the Midwest. I grew up in rural Ohio and, to be honest, I had a pretty great childhood. Like Christopher Robin, I had my own hundred-acre-wood. My special place, deep in the woods, was a huge fallen tree; it was a pirate ship one day, and it was Tarzan's tree house the next, and Davy Crockett's log cabin the next.

I was a farm boy: gathering fresh eggs every morning, working in the fields, cleaning out the barns. On school days, I would get up about six a.m., and go out to the barn, to put down hay for the sheep. The water in the barnyard came from an ancient, green, hand pump that was taller than me. It was a monster that shattered the morning silence, with its creaking and complaining, as I pumped water into the trough. On the coldest days, I'd have to bring a pail of hot water from the kitchen to prime the pump.

My dad was a firefighter; while still in his 30's, he became a fire chief. He farmed on his days off. Dad taught me how to drive a tractor when I was nine. Every year, he and I would raise an acre of sweet corn. No such thing as a Farmers' Market in those days; so in July and August, Dad and I would get up at dawn and pick corn and go into town; where I would pull my little red wagon, and go door to door, selling sweet corn.

Dad let me keep the profits; and so I had my own little blue passbook savings account. I was so proud.

And then, one dark and cold November morning, when I was 12 years old, it all came to an end. I was awakened by an unearthly cry: a sound unlike anything I have ever heard, before or since.

I ran downstairs, to find that the sound was coming from my mother. There were two firefighters, in their dress blue uniforms, in the kitchen with Mom. They said, "Son, last night, there was a fire, a terrible fire. The building exploded. We lost your father."

In that moment, my idyllic childhood ended. And all that had been before stopped. In short order, we had to sell the farm. Mom and I moved into town. And, bit by bit, we started over.

Now, what I remember from that time is that all of the adults whom I looked up to - all those people who made the world safe for me - seemed lost at sea.

And I especially remember not knowing how I was supposed to feel, and how I was supposed to grieve. How are you supposed to act, when you are a 12-year-old boy whose father had been killed? Was I supposed to be sad all the time? Was it okay to be angry? Would I ever be allowed to laugh again or play with my friends?

One thing I've discovered over these many years is that this is a question that never quite goes away, when we face the death of someone we love: How am I supposed to act? What am I supposed to feel?

Dear friends, we gather here this morning as a loving community, full of grief. We find ourselves struggling to come to terms with the inconceivable loss of Lori Hutchinson, a very dear soul, a lively spirit, and a good friend, who has been such a vital member of this congregation.

I much appreciated the note that Pastor Alan sent out, acknowledging both deep sadness and a great sigh of relief, because Lori's terrible suffering is over. But we have so many other jumbled-up feelings as well: sweet memories, poignant moments, funny stories, the pain that we feel for Bill, gratitude that she was part of our lives, guilt that we didn't do more, and anger at the injustice of it all. Also, for many of us, Lori's death brings an unwelcome reminder of our own mortality, and how precious and uncertain is our time on this earth.

I have to tell you that another thing that is burned into my memory from those days after my father was killed, is all of those well-meaning people who tried tell me that this was "God's will"; or who offered convoluted explanations for why God took my Dad away. To my 12-year-old mind, none of this reasoning made any sense at all. None of it was comforting, nor did it help me understand how such a thing could happen.

"There was a fire, a terrible fire. We lost your father." With those words, my childhood ended. But it is also true that this is when my faith journey began. It began in grief and bewilderment; and with questions that no one could answer.

Most of you know that I had a long career as a pastor; and I was a seminary professor. For heaven's sakes, I even have a PhD in religion! But after all the books I've read, and all the sermons I've preached - after all of that - my own personal faith journey remains rooted, inescapably, in the insistent, honest-to-God questions of that wounded 12-year-old boy.

Now, my mother, my dear, strong mother, was not "lost at sea" for very long; neither was the rest of our family. The bonds of love and determination that we shared, and the amazing support of our church and our community, kept us going through those dark days. So we survived; and gradually, we learned to thrive once again, as Dad would want us to. The emotions became less raw. The wounds healed, and life went on.

Although, I'm sure you know as well as I do, there are some wounds that never heal. Not really. There is a hole in our heart that never closes.

Indeed, even as we consider Lori's death this morning, and as I share my own, very personal story with you, I know, I know, that you also have your own very personal stories of grief and loss.

Perhaps some of you here lost your own "idyllic childhood" through death or divorce or some other unwelcome change. Many of us here have lost a loved one, a friend, maybe even a life partner.

Our losses are legion.

Sam Keen is a Sonoma resident and a marvelous, inspiring, author, whose bestselling books include *Fire in the Belly* and *Hymns to an Unknown God*. At one point, Sam talks about love and loss, and he writes, "The stage on which my life plays out was once filled with the vivid presence of marvelous actors whom I have loved. Now that stage is crowded with ghosts."

But it's not only lost loved ones. There are many kinds of grief and loss: loss of a job, a relationship, our health, our dreams. I suspect each of us has had life "throw us a curve ball"; that is, we have had our lives interrupted, our plans changed, by something we never saw coming. No one's life proceeds in a straight line. Now, some of us have had more to deal with than others; but we all carry some measure of grief and loss.

No doubt this is a part of why we come to church, why we pray, why we study the scriptures. We seek consolation, of course. But we also seek to understand, to make sense of it all.

My dad was a good man; so why did he have to die? Lori was still so young, with so much to live for: why did she have to get this terrible disease? Why does an all-loving, all-powerful God cause such pain in the world - or at least, allow it to happen?

I continue to wrestle with these questions. And I continue to have zero patience for simplistic faith that offers pat answers, or neat and tidy formulas about "God's will" or something. No!

Another thing I have learned, is that you cannot strike a deal with God. I remember one especially painful moment when, as a pastor, I was asked to console a man whose wife and young son had been killed in a car accident.

The man was just bewildered. He said, "I thought if I was a good person, and went to church, and tried to do the right things, then God would look out for me. I thought he would protect my loved ones. But God didn't hold up his end of the bargain."

But, as we know, there is no deal, no bargaining with God. There are no guarantees. Bad things do happen to good people.

Which leads right back to the question of why sad and tragic things happen at all, in a world that is supposedly run by an all-loving and all-powerful God.

Now, let me just say that I am well-aware of a kind of theology that has taken root among us progressive Christians in recent years, in which God is defined as all-loving but not all-powerful. I hear people talk these days about God as a kind of Loving Parent: a "God of love and grace" who is with us always, and who is heart-broken over our sorrows; but who, apparently, can't do much about it. And, dear friends, if this loving-but-not-powerful God makes sense to you - if this works for you - that's fine. I'm not trying to talk you out of it.

But, please understand that, for me, the mysterious and sacred Other whom we call "God" is defined as the One Who Holds the Power. For me, that's who God is. The Mystery that we call "God" is the Creator, and the still-creative Force, beyond all that is and ever will be. God is Love, yes! But God is also Power - the power that lies beyond all human control, and lies beyond all the forces of nature.

Listen again to the words of that stirring hymn we started off with this morning: "God of the Ages, who with sure command, brought forth in beauty all the starry band of shining worlds in splendor through the skies." Indeed, our scriptures and our hymns testify to a God who is both loving and powerful, a God "who's got the whole world in his hands," whom we describe as "gentle in her power and strong in her tenderness."

Let's turn then to the scripture reading today, from the Gospel of Mark. In this familiar passage, Jesus sums up the entire Christian moral code in two sentences from the Torah: "You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, all your soul, and mind, and strength." And, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Indeed, this twofold love, of God and of neighbor, is the very heart of our faith. We are called to love God and to love one another.

Now, with the second part, "Love your neighbor as yourself," at least I understand the concept. I'm not always good at it! But at least I know what it means.

But, what about loving God with all my heart and soul and mind and strength? How can I love a God whose actions often seem capricious and arbitrary? And how can I love an invisible, spiritual being? I mean, it is one thing to love the person standing right in front of me - that's hard enough. But how do I love the holy and mysterious Other, the one we call God?

Several years ago, the 20th-century novelist John Updike (a personal favorite of mine) received an award as a distinguished Christian author; and he said this: "Is not Christian fiction - insofar as such a thing even exists - is it not a description of the bewilderment and panic, the sense of hollowness and futility, which afflicts those whose search for God is not successful? And is it not true of all of us, that we are not successful? Whether we are in the church or not, are we not more 'searcher,' than we are 'finder?'"

Well, I suspect it's true, that we are all more searcher than we are finder; and so we find ourselves still seeking, still yearning for that closer walk with God: "*Just a closer walk with Thee, O Jesus, grant my plea. Daily walking close to Thee: Let it be, dear Lord, let it be.*"

The Protestant Reformation, in a very real sense, began with Martin Luther's intimate daily walk with God: his agonizing and deeply painful spiritual struggle, which eventually led him to his great insight about God's love and grace. But Luther understood God, not only as "Love," but also as "Other"- radically Other. According to Luther, God remains essentially unknowable, and hidden from us.

As Theologian David Tracy points out, "The heart of Luther's insight into the nature of God is that God's revelation is through hiddenness. In other words, God is revealed in contrary ways: God reveals life through death, God reveals wisdom through folly, and God reveals strength through weakness." Thus, the One whom we call God remains fundamentally unknown, and unknowable.

Of course, our tendency, especially in the church, is to domesticate God, and to speak as if we actually know what God is like. And nobody is worse at this than us preachers! - well, unless it would be politicians during an election year.

But, the truth is that the ways of God remain hidden from us. They are mysterious, and often unsettling. For God begins at that point where human understanding ends. God is the Great Unknown.

And when God is revealed, often it comes in the hiddenness of suffering, and grief, and irreconcilable loss.

Indeed, the hard truth of my own spiritual journey is that it is unlikely that I would have been drawn into such intimate connection with God, if I had not suffered such a loss, such grief, so early in my life. I may never have learned to trust the Unknowable God as I now do.

And, to be honest, if it were not for my anger at God, and my railing at God over the years, I suspect that I would never have come to feel as embraced and held by the Love of God as I now do.

My guess is that the same might well be true for you. Our suffering can teach us a great deal. There is much we can learn from the sorrows and upsets, the hurt and the turmoil of our lives.

Now, there are no guarantees that this will happen. But, perhaps, our grief and our losses can open up new reservoirs of faith within us. It just may be that our passionate, poignant, and honest-to-the-bones questions will lead to answers that are equally honest-to-the-bone - and yet are beyond words, and beyond explanation.

Dear friends, as you walk through this "world of toil and snares," may you feel the Sacred Presence with you. May you have your own closer walk with God.

"Daily walking close to Thee: Let it be, dear Lord, let it be."

Amen.

