



Text: Spiritual but not religious? Our Satan Who Art in Heaven – Rev. Jason Micheli

Today is confirmation, the ancient ritual in which young disciples make good on their baptismal pledge to follow in the footsteps that lead to suffering, crucifixion and death.

So it's a happy occasion.

A long time ago, the age at which you were confirmed was called the 'age of reason,' meaning confirmation marks the age when you're now old enough to know right from sin.

In other words, today- confirmation day- marks the point when God starts to hold you accountable for all your sins, stupid lies and dirty thoughts- so I think congratulations are in order.

Just kidding. The 'age of reason' is from a different time, a different world.

I was confirmed 20 years ago today. 20 years- it was a different world.

Back then, Hillary Clinton and Jeb Bush were rumored to be considering presidential runs, Russia had just invaded a neighboring republic and an obnoxious theme song from a recently released Disney movie was on every radio station and every child's lips.

Like I said, it was a completely different world.

I remember my first confirmation class. After beginning with a spaghetti dinner, the Reverend Dennis Perry taught our lesson.

Back then, Dennis Perry had white hair, a bad memory and tended not to prepare but shot from the hip instead.

Everything was different.

Because I hadn't grown in the Church or in a Christian family, I was about 5 years older than any of the other confirmation students, which meant- by default- I was smartest one in the class, which meant I loved confirmation.

I was different back then.

I remember that first class. Dennis wheeled in a dry erase board. He sketched a scribble-scrabble drawing on the board, trying to help us conceive of the difference between eternity and creation.

And then in his terrible hand-writing, Dennis wrote a funny, little word on the board: immutable.

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'That means,' he said, 'God doesn't change.'

We might change. The world might change. But God does not change. Ever. Immutable.

That was 20 years ago. And the world does change.

20 years ago, according to Gallup, 40% of Americans had attended a worship service in the previous 2 weeks, and 20 years ago if you asked Americans for their religious affiliation the number who checked 'None' was 8%.

It was a different world.

Over 50 years ago, the year this church was founded, 50% of Americans, according to Gallup, attended worship every Sunday.

The year this church was founded, church membership across America was growing at twice the rate of the general population. Think about that- churches in America were growing 2 times faster than America.

And the year this church was founded, 1956, if you asked Americans for their religious affiliation the number who checked 'None' was just 4%.

It was a different world.

It is a different world.

Just last year, 20% of Americans checked 'None' when asked about their religious affiliation.

One-fifth of everybody.

If you count those between the ages of 20 and 30 the percentage- emerging adults- jumps up to over 30%.

Over 40% of that age group report that religion 'doesn't matter very much to them.'

40% of the people who will have gray hair when you're my age say that what we do here doesn't really matter.

We're not just confirming you as disciples today.

We're sending you off into a world that is very different than anything the rest of us have had to face.

Not only are we sending you off into a completely different world, we're also handing you a great deal of baggage to carry into that new world.



According to a *Barna* study of those between the ages of 20-30, when given a list of possible attributes to describe Christians:

91% checked 'yes' to the description 'anti-homosexual.'

87% checked 'yes' next to the adjective 'judgmental.'

86% checked 'yes' next 'anti-science.'

85% checked 'yes' to 'hypocritical.'

78% checked 'yes' to 'too involved in partisan politics.'

72% checked 'yes' to 'out of touch with my reality.'

70% checked 'yes' to 'insensitive.'

64% said Christians were 'not accepting of those different than them.'

All that together adds up to one very large millstone we're putting around your neck today.

A millstone whose message is clear, if unintended:

God is against you.

Who wouldn't check 'None' if that god was the other option?

As familiar as the Lord's Prayer is, what's often forgotten is the reason Jesus gives the disciples this prayer in the first place.

Because it's not that they didn't know how to pray.

As uneducated 1st century Jews from backwater Galilee they knew how to pray better than all of you, and they did so more often.

As 1st century Jews, the disciples would've had all 150 Psalms memorized, ready to recite by heart.

3 times a day (sundown, sunup, and 3:00 PM) they would've stopped wherever they were and whatever they were doing and prayed.



They would've prayed the *shema* ('Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one'). They would've prayed the *amidah*, a series of 18 benedictions, and they would've recited the 10 Commandments.

3 times a day.

So Jesus doesn't give the disciples this prayer because they didn't know how to pray. They knew how.

This prayer isn't about the how of prayer it's about the who:

'Do not be like the pagans when you pray...'

The pagans believed that god- the gods- changed.

The pagans believed god's mood towards us could swing from one fickle extreme to its opposite, that god could be offended or outraged or flattered by us, that sometimes god could be for us but other times god could be against us.

And so the pagans of Jesus' day, they would pray ridiculously long prayers, rattling off every divine name, invoking every possible attribute of god, heaping on as much praise and adoration as they could muster.

In order to please and placate god.

To manipulate god. To get god to be for them and not against them.

You see, the pagans believed that if they were good and prayed properly then god would reward them, but if they were bad and failed to offer an acceptable worship then god would punish them.

The who the pagans prayed to was:

An auditor always tallying our ledger to bestow blame or blessing based on what we deserve.

An accuser always watching us and weighing our deeds to condemn us for punishment or recommend us for reward.

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The pagans had a lot of names for who they prayed to: Mars, Jupiter...

But scripture has one name for the kind of person the pagans prayed to: הַסָּטָן , ha-satan. What we call Satan.

In the Old Testament, satan doesn't have 2 horns, a tail and a pitchfork.

In the Old Testament, satan isn't the Prince of Darkness or the personification of evil.

In the Old Testament, satan is our accuser- that's all the word means.

Satan is one who casts blame upon us, who finds fault in us, who indicts us for what we deserve.

The reason Jesus gives this prayer isn't methodology.

It's theology.

It's not the how.

It's the who.

Because the pagans got who god is so completely wrong, they didn't know how to pray. They went on and on, thinking they needed to change god's mind about them.

Jesus warns us not to be like the pagans not because he's worried we'll prattle on too long or call upon the name of Zeus.

No, Jesus doesn't want us to turn God into a kind of satan.

Jesus doesn't want us to mistake God for an accuser, to confuse God for one who casts blame and doles out what's deserved.

Jesus gives this prayer so we won't ever slip into supposing that God is against us.

Actually, it's not really Jesus' prayer.

It's the Qaddish, an ancient Jewish prayer the disciples would've recognized and been able to recite themselves. And because they would've known it, they would've instantly noticed how Jesus changes it.

He changes it right from the beginning. Rather than starting, as the Qaddish does, with 'hallowed be his great name' Jesus changes it to 'Father in Heaven.'

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And, of course, Jesus has in mind not just any father, not 'father' in the abstract, not anything analogous to your father or my father but his Father.

The Father who, Jesus says, sends rain upon the just and the unjust. The Father who, no matter what we deserve, just sends love.

The Father who forgives for we know not what we do.

The Father who never stops waiting and is always ready to celebrate a prodigal's return.

The Father who reacts to the crosses we build with resurrection.

You see, Jesus changes the Qaddish so that from the outset we are pointed to someone far different than who the pagans prayed to.

We're pointed to his Father.

And that's the second change Jesus makes to the Qaddish: the number.

Jesus takes it from the singular and makes it plural.

It's not just his Father; it's our Father now.

We're brought into his relationship with his Father. We're adopted.

One way of making sure we never get wrong who it is we're praying to is to remember we're praying to Jesus' Father.

He made it plural. We've been included.

And Jesus' Father never cast blame on him, never accused him, never acted like a satan, never did anything but love him.

The last change Jesus makes to the Qaddish is to the end. Jesus adds on 'deliver us from the evil one.'

In Greek that's ho-poneros. In Hebrew, it's ha-satan.

Deliver us from the accuser.

In other words, the very concern that prompts Jesus to give this prayer in the first place is tacked onto the ending of it.



When we pray, whenever we pray- Jesus says, which for him means 3 times a day- when we pray, we should pray to be delivered from ever thinking of God as our accuser, from ever thinking of God as one who casts down upon us, from ever thinking that God is against us.

It's a helpful reminder because very often the god we pray to, the god in the back of our minds, the god we unwittingly proclaim is a kind of satan.

Don't believe me?

Just this week I was talking with a friend in the community. He lost his wife a few months ago after a long illness. They have a son, no older than our confirmands. This week the man learned he has a serious form of cancer.

Eventually our conversation boiled down to 1 question:

Why is God doing this to me?

Of course that question is on our minds all the time.

The difficult pregnancy or the scary prognosis, the marriage that can't heal or the dream that didn't come true even though you prayed holes in the rug-

LIFE HAPPENS

-and we think God must be punishing us.

That this is happening for a reason.

That this suffering is because of that sin.

That God is giving us what we deserve.

That this is coming to us because God is against us.

Life happens and we want to know why: why is God doing this to me?

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And of course we don't have answers to the why.

But we do have an answer about the who.

The 1 answer Jesus gives us, the answer Jesus gives us again and again, is this one:

The god you think is doing this to you isn't God.

God's not like that. My Father isn't like that. Our Father isn't like that.

Don't be like the pagans.

And just in case you forget, here's this prayer. When you pray...pray this way.

We're not just confirming you today, we're sending you into a different world.

I wonder-

If the pre-Christian world thought of god as a kind of satan, then I wonder if the post-Christian world will too?

Because if so, there's never been a better time to be a Christian.

When you're my age, the people who will have gray hair will fall out like this:

Out of 10 people,

2 will be 'selective adherents' meaning they come to worship when someone makes them, like on Christmas or Confirmation.

1 will consider themselves 'open to spirituality.'

4 will be 'religiously indifferent.'

1 will be a committed person of faith, any faith.

And 2 will be actively irreligious- atheists.

Look at that.

9 out of 10.

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There's never been a better time to be a Christian.

And sure, we're handing you baggage too.

But you can put this baggage down because the god behind that baggage isn't God. The god behind that baggage is a kind of satan.

So put it down.

There's never been a better time to be a Christian.

Because when you're my age, 9/10 people won't know what Dennis taught me when I was confirmation age:

That God doesn't change. God's never changed. God will never change.

God just is Love and unconditionally in love with each of us.

When you're my age, 9/10 people won't know what Dennis taught me when I was confirmed:

That God doesn't change.

And so God never changes his mind about us. You.

God's love does not depend on what we do or what we're like.

There's nothing you can do to make God love you more and there's nothing you can do to make God love you less.

9/10 when you're my age won't know what Dennis taught me: that God doesn't change.

God doesn't care whether we're sinners or saints.

As far as God's love is concerned, our sin makes absolutely no difference to God.

We can't change God because God doesn't change.

9/10.

9/10 won't know that God sends rain upon the just and the unjust.

That God never gives us what we deserve and always gives us more than we deserve.

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9/10 won't know that God forgives even when we know exactly what we do.

9/10 won't know that God is an old lady who'll turn her house upside-down for something that no one else would find valuable,

a shepherd who never gives up the search for the single sheep,

a Father- Jesus' Father, Our Father-

who never stops looking down the road and is always ready to say 'we have no choice but to celebrate.'

There's never been a better time to be a Christian.

Because when you're my age in the post-Christian world, you can set aside all the baggage, you can forget about all the accessories we argue about and you can get down to the basic, simple message that transformed the pre-Christian world:

God is for us. You.

Always.

Nothing can change that.

Because God doesn't change.

Of course, you've got more than 20 years before you're my age.

That's a long time.

Too long to remember everything I just said.

So maybe you could just try remembering that 1 word I remember Dennis teaching me: immutable.

Or maybe instead to help you remember, whenever you pray...pray like this...