

Note: This series is from 2009 when *The Shack* was first published. Factor that in as you read these sermons. Some references might be dated. RD

Finding God in The Shack

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This document contains:

- Part one: *How do finite people describe an infinite God?*
- Part two: *Be careful how you judge others*. Page 8
- Part three: *The Great Sadness*, page 15
- Part four: *The Personal God*, page 23
- Part five: *Questioning the Nature of God*, page 31
- Part six: *Who is in Charge of the Trinity?*, page 38
- Part seven: *Forgiveness*, page 47

Finding God in The Shack

Part One: *How do finite people describe an infinite God?*

By Remy Diederich
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Welcome to Cedarbrook and my new series called *Finding God in The Shack*. Every year or two a book or movie takes the country by storm. A few years ago that book was *The DaVinci Code*. It was all the rage for a year or two. Everyone seemed to be reading it.

The DaVinci Code was a mystery that challenged our thoughts on the Catholic Church as well as the Bible. And some of you may remember that I seized the moment to do a series looking at the validity of the Bible and if we could really trust it.

Well, *The Shack* is another mystery that has hit the scene that deals with not so much the Bible but the nature of God and how God can help us heal from the pain of tragedy. And again, I want to seize the moment to look at the Bible and address a number of questions that the book raises.

Now, let me be clear. When I talk about *The Shack* or *The DaVinci Code* it's just a set up to get us to look at the Bible. Those books aren't my source of truth. I just use their popularity to get us to turn to the Bible for answers. I tell you that so when your friends come up to you and say, "*I hear your pastor doesn't use the Bible, he just preaches from books*" that you can set them straight, okay?

Today I'll be talking a lot about *The Shack*, but pay attention to what I'm doing because I'm using *The Shack* as an illustration to teach some very important principles about both God and the Bible.

Since I'm going to be talking about *The Shack* for a few weeks, let me take a few minutes to bring you up to speed on the book. It's really a phenomenon. As of December there were already over 4 million copies in print. As of this week *The Shack* is listed as the number one fiction paperback on the NY Times best seller list. And on Amazon.com it's the number one selling mystery book. And the cool thing about that is that the book is all about a God encounter.

What that tells me is that millions of people are hungry to hear about a loving God who is able to heal their pain. But isn't it interesting that those same people aren't flocking to church. Somehow people don't think that they are going to hear about a loving God in church. That's not a natural connection that they make. I hope that bothers you as much as it bothers me.

Is it Heresy?

But in spite of all the good that's coming from this book some church people are calling it heresy. Personally I love the book because it's getting people to talk about God. And that's half the battle...just getting people to acknowledge a need or interest in God. *The Shack* is helping people to understand God who have never understood him before, and that's a good thing!

You know, as I read the book I had to laugh because almost all the issues he raises in the book are points of theology that I studied in seminary. He tackles some deep topics - topics that are typically restricted to theologians and he made those topics accessible to not only the average *churched* person but the average *unchurched* person as well. That's *very* impressive...really a gift to be able to communicate deep theological concepts to a mass audience.

A Brief Overview

Before I say any more let me give you a brief overview of the book for those of you that haven't read it. Mackenzie Philips is the central character. While his wife is away he takes his three children on a camping trip in Oregon. While Mack runs to rescue two of his kids from a boating mishap, his youngest daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and then murdered. Eventually evidence of her death is found in an abandoned shack in the mountains. Four years later Mack receives a note from someone called "Papa," inviting him to meet at the shack. So Mack decides to visit the shack to see if he can find any resolution to his pain.

As he approaches the shack he's afraid that he might encounter his daughter's killer but instead he encounters God in a very human way. The Father, Son and Spirit all appear in the form of people; the Father appears, as Mack tells us, "as a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor". The Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu and Jesus appears as a Middle Eastern laborer in blue jeans and a flannel shirt. The rest of the book records the conversation that Mack has with the Trinity of God.

As a result of this experience Mack reconsiders his assumptions about God. And that's what happens for the reader as well.

And I think that's the genius of the book - and what makes it so fascinating to people - is that by breaking from our traditional ways of thinking about God and talking about God the story makes

the Father, Son and Spirit fresh again. It's like hearing about God for the first time. And because of that, not only does Mack find healing but many readers have found healing from their pain.

The author, Paul Young, wrote the book to deal with some of his own pain. He was sexually abused as a child. He lost some loved ones prematurely to death. And he had an affair that almost destroyed his marriage as an adult. He says that *The Shack* is really a metaphor for the place in his life where all of his sin and pain was stored and how God met him in that very spot.

The Christian Broadcasting Network interviewed the author last year and I want to show you that clip.

Video Interview: visit YouTube for video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYvjRiun3MA>

What Are People Saying About The Shack?

The response to the book has been incredible. Let me read some comments from readers...

The Shack is a one of a kind invitation to journey to the very heart of God. Through my tears and cheers, I have been indeed transformed by the tender mercy with which [the author] opened the veil that ... separated me from God and from myself. With every page, the complicated do's and don't that distort a relationship into a religion were washed away as I understood Father, Son, and Holy Ghost for the first time in my life. Patrick M. Roddy, Emmy Award Winning Producer of ABC News

I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciated reading The Shack and how much it has meant to my wife and me. We lost a son in an accident years ago and this story brought comfort and healing Dave Coleman, retired Hospice Chaplain

Theologian, Eugene Peterson, who wrote *The Message* translation of the Bible compared *The Shack* to the classic book *Pilgrim's Progress*. He said...

This book has the potential to do for our generation what John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress did for his. It's that good! Eugene Peterson, outofur.com

And I read where leaders in one church denomination bought cases of the book so they could give a copy to each pastor in their districts.¹

But not everyone is so happy with the book. Chuck Colson is disturbed by *"the author's low view of Scripture."* Outofur.com.

A leading theologian² in a large church denomination said that the book... *includes undiluted heresy...It is a deeply troubling book.*

On his weekly talk show he called it, *"deeply subversive," "scripturally incorrect" and downright "dangerous."*

And Mark Driscoll, an increasingly popular and often quoted pastor from Seattle said:

¹ Foursquare Church noted in Charisma Magazine, December 2008

² Al Moler from the Southern Baptist Convention

³ Al Moler from the Southern Baptist Convention
May 28, 2008, USA Today, outofur.com

⁴ The good news is that after praying with her to find God's truth for her life she sensed that God was NOT

"If you haven't read The Shack, don't!"

He tells people that he is "horrified" by the book because "it misrepresents God".³ On his YouTube clip he gives [four reasons why he hates the book](#). One of the reasons is that he thinks it promotes goddess worship because the Father is represented by a woman. He is afraid that if people read *The Shack* they will start to think that God is a woman and we'll all lose our understanding of the nature of God.

Don't Miss the Point

So, that's my introduction to this phenomenon called *The Shack*. But with the rest of my time I want to address the criticism that it's dangerous and subversive and that we shouldn't read it. That kind of talk really concerns me because I think it misses the point of the book. It not only misses the point of *The Shack* but misses the point at so many levels when it comes to talking about God and the Bible. Plus it makes Christians sound like narrow minded book burners. I really don't want Mark Driscoll, or these other people I quoted, speaking for me. So I want to seize what I consider a teachable moment and talk about some things that I think are central to God's character, the Bible and who God calls us to be.

I can really identify with what Paul Young is doing. He's more concerned about helping people know God than he is concerned about following the established norms of how good Christians talk about God. That's been our heart in starting this church. We have been willing to break some of the rules, so to speak, just to put more emphasis on reaching people with a message about God's life-changing love. What Paul Young has done is to say,

Look, people aren't getting the right message about God. Somehow there is a whole group of people out there who are convinced that God is distant, judgmental and unloving and we've got to do something to change that perspective.

So he broke all the rules and opened up an entirely new window revealing a loving merciful God. I heard that Young took his book to 27 publishers, both Christian and secular, and no one wanted it. One of the problems was that no one had a category for it. They didn't know how to label it so they just rejected it altogether. But thankfully two of his friends decided to publish it for him and the rest is history. And now people are getting the message.

The biggest criticism that people have about the book is that it's not biblical. But I think the author has done something *very* biblical. He's helped us to understand God *with a story*. Isn't that what Jesus did? When Jesus taught he didn't do in depth Bible teaching but he used common stories and simple metaphors to help people understand God in a way they never had before. He took the God of the universe and made him understandable by telling stories.

That's exactly what *The Shack* does. There's a word for that. It's called *accommodation*. To accommodate means that you make adjustments to fit one thing into another – to bring two things together that don't normally fit. You see, this is the problem – we've got an infinite God that is trying to reveal himself to finite human beings.

³ May 28, 2008, USA Today, ouroufur.com

Now, that's impossible. The finite can never fully understand the infinite. And language, the tool we normally use to bring things together, is by nature *finite*... which means it is inadequate in describing the infinite. I can talk all day, every day about God for a hundred years and still not do justice to describing the nature of God. Language will never be able to accurately describe God. So you have to do the next best thing, you *accommodate* people by using analogies that compare God to something we know.

Like I said, Jesus did the same thing. The Bible tells us that

Jesus always used stories and illustrations ... when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using ... parables. Matthew 13:34

The word "parable" means to lie something down alongside something else. A parable is a story that says, *if you understand this then you will understand that*. For example, Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like a farmer or yeast or a treasure or a mustard seed.

Now, is the Kingdom of God *really* a mustard seed? Of course not. But Jesus wasn't concerned that we'd suddenly get all confused about the nature of the kingdom. He gave us some credit for our ability to think. He trusted that we'd understand what he meant by the kingdom of God being a seed. He was making a simple point that the kingdom of God starts small and grows.

By using a simple analogy Jesus accommodates us and makes a big concept small and understandable. Jesus breaks off a little piece of the Kingdom of God and explains it to us with something that we can all relate to.

Paul Young did the same thing by comparing Father God to a big black woman. Young gives his readers credit. He believes they are capable of understanding that a big black woman isn't really a picture of the fullness of God but merely an analogy to help us understand a piece of God. Young used a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor to represent the *approachableness* of God.

You see, many people don't understand prayer. We can't imagine hanging out, talking with God. We can't fathom how the finite relates to the infinite. We struggle with that. So he says, well, it's like this...

It's like going to a country shack where a friendly woman is making breakfast and you just sit there and talk to her while she makes pancakes.

Most of us get that. We understand it's a simple analogy. Most of us aren't going to leap to the conclusion that that's who God really is. So Young does exactly what God did in the Bible. He accommodates us. He helps fit an infinite God into our puny brain. And I think he did a good job of it.

You know, the Bible is full of accommodation. For example, in the Bible, David called God a rock.

The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. Psalm 18:1,2

Now, most of us don't give it a second thought. It seems normal. But if you did think about it, it might seem offensive. How dare David call God a rock! But we aren't threatened by that analogy. We don't cry "heresy" and criticize David for reducing God to a chunk of minerals and dirt. And we don't fear that everyone is going to start worshipping rocks thinking they are God.

When David called God his rock he was referring to one particular attribute of God and that was his protection. When David was running from King Saul he would hide in the caves or crevices in the rock walls in the mountains. And as he hid there he realized that God protected him just like those rock caves did.

David is accommodating our puny minds. He's reducing God to one attribute to make his point. How do you talk about an infinite God protecting finite people? Well, he's like a cave in a rock. Or he adds a couple other analogies, He's like a shield. He's like a fortress.

We don't bat an eye at those analogies. We understand the literary device of comparison and metaphor. But, if you think God being a large black woman is weird, listen to how David describes God a few verses later. He pictures God as a fire breathing dragon riding angels to our rescue...

Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it. He parted the heavens and came down; dark clouds were under his feet. He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind... Psalm 18:6-19

Isn't that great? Now, I probably shouldn't have read that to you because I'm afraid some of you might go home and start worshipping dragons!

What I want you to see here today is that to charge *The Shack* with heresy or goddess worship or being unbiblical isn't fair. In fact, just the opposite is true. *The Shack* uses the same strategy as the Bible to help people understand God.

The most biblical thing we can do is to talk about God in a way that makes people want to know more about him. I don't think it is very biblical to quote the Bible or talk about the Bible in ways that bore people to death and pushes them away from God. So, rather than condemn *The Shack* I think we need a lot MORE books like this, not less. We need *more* creative ways to talk about God, not less. Since God is infinite that means there are an infinite number of ways to describe him. And as creative people we should be looking for those ways rather than wearing out thread bare analogies that people have been using for centuries.

You know, everyone has a right to their opinion. And I respect the critics I quoted earlier as true followers of Jesus but their criticism of *The Shack* only reinforces what so many people hate about church. People often think church is a group of narrow minded people who want to tell them how to think. They think churches want them to check their brains at the door and just embrace the church's view of God with no questions asked. And that's offensive to them so they stay away from church in droves. (That's very offensive to me too, by the way!)

But these critics of *The Shack* need to remember how big God is. He's infinite. And if he's infinite there are millions and millions of ways to describe God. Now, it's true that God isn't

whomever anyone wants him to be. His character is governed by specific attributes like love and holiness and faithfulness. But I believe that God delights in our coming up with new and creative ways to explore the depths of his nature within his revealed nature.

It's like the old analogy of the four blind men trying to describe an elephant. One says that an elephant is like a tree trunk. Another one says that an elephant is like a snake (that is, describing its tail), Another man (touching a tusk) says that an elephant is long and smooth and feels like stone, while yet another man, touching the trunk, says an elephant is like a big round fire hose.

They are all right and they are all wrong. Every description falls short of what an elephant is. Taken together you begin to understand what an elephant is. But reject any description and your understanding of an elephant is seriously damaged.

And that's how I feel about rejecting *The Shack*. Why would we want to reject what has helped so many people understand God better? Let's not criticize Paul Young or anyone who dares to describe God in new ways. We need all the descriptions of God we can get to appreciate how big God is. *The Shack* has made people hungry to know God. I think we should celebrate that and not fight against it. It should challenge us to find new ways to talk about God that will reach new people.

Prayer: Father, you are so big. Forgive us for ever trying to put you in a box or trying to keep others from exploring your depths. Help us not be rigid or close minded. We don't want to misrepresent you in that way or cause people to turn away from the church. Thanks for giving us minds that can be used to describe you in creative ways. I ask that you would give us many more authors and poets and song writers that will help us to explore the height and the depth and the breadth and the width of your love. Amen

Going Deeper

Use the following questions for personal reflection or to discuss with family, friends or your small group from church.

1. If you've read *The Shack*, share briefly your impressions of the book. What did you like? What didn't you like?
2. Look up the word "accommodate" in the dictionary (or google it). What does it mean?
3. How do you accommodate others or how do others need to accommodate you to help you understand certain things?
4. What are some ways that God accommodate us?
5. Read the following verses. What analogies does God use to help us better understand him...

- Psalm 89:26
- John 6:49
- Deuteronomy 32:11
- Deuteronomy 4:24
- John 10:7
- John 1:29
- 2 Samuel 22:29
- Revelation 5:5
- Deuteronomy 33:29
- John 15:5

6. God speaks to us in ways that we can understand an infinite God (as best as that is possible). But in reality, God transcends all of our descriptions of him. Given God's nature, are you ever guilty of putting God "in a box"? That is, do you feel like you know who God is and find yourself unable to see God as bigger than you know him to be?

7. In *The Shack*, the author uses unusual human examples to help describe God. Do you think it is appropriate to talk about God in this way? Why or why not?

8. Comment on this statement: The most biblical thing we can do is talk about God in a way that makes people want to know more about him.

Finding God in The Shack

Part Two: *Be careful how you judge others*

By Remy Diederich

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Last week I introduced my new series called, *Finding God in The Shack*, a look at what the Bible has to say about some of the issues raised in the book, *The Shack*. The book has a lot of great themes that I will explore in coming weeks about the character of God and how to deal with tragedy. But before I can get to those themes I feel a need to cut through some of the controversy that surrounds the book. You see, the crazy thing about this book is that some Christians think it's a gift from God while others think it came straight from hell! Ya gotta love the church! The level of polarization on this is amazing. Some of you probably don't know what to think.

I don't really care if you love it or hate it but what bothers me is how so many Christians have jumped to criticize the book as heresy and labeled its author as a deceptive heretic. And when I

see that I just want to say, *Whoa, Whoa, Whoa. Time out. Let's be careful how we talk about someone, especially someone that loves Jesus like the rest of us.*

You see, I think it's important to talk about this, not just for the sake of Paul Young, the author, but for the sake of the church. When we criticize people with whom we disagree, it not only wounds the people we judge but it breeds contempt for the church and undermines our mission. It just sends the entirely wrong message and makes us all look bad.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. This is what one blogger said...

What's Wrong With The Shack Book?

The Shack is full of false doctrine looked past by people who are emotionally swept out into the sea of deception. They look past the truth of God's Word because they want a god of their own making, one who fails to punish for sin unrepented of.

The primary source of this bad doctrine is because the trinity of The Shack Book is not the Trinity of the Bible. Rather it is the goddess Kali. This is the book for you if you believe in a Universal salvation without seeking forgiveness, if you want a god who loves without logic, and if you don't know or don't care about biblical truth and sound doctrine. WatcherontheWall

The church is famous for this kind of negativity. You'd think we'd learn from our past mistakes. I mean, we've already got the Crusades and the New England witch hunts to live down. I don't think the church really needs any more bad press. The surprising thing is that Jesus said that people would know us by *our love* for one another but it seems that we are often known more for our hate. It's kind of embarrassing.

Plus, it runs totally contrary to what Jesus called us to do. Listen to what Jesus prayed just before the end of his ministry...

Father...my prayer is ... that all of [my followers] may be one, ...so that the world may believe that you have sent me. John 17:20,21

It's hard to be one when you are accusing someone of heresy, deception and goddess worship. Now, I'm not saying that we shouldn't ever disagree with people. I spent four weeks last year talking about the importance of appropriately confronting people that are in the wrong. I'm just asking us to be *constructive* when we disagree with someone and not *destructive*. Truth doesn't give us permission to be cruel.

So, today, rather than talk about issues in *The Shack*, I want to talk about this issue of judging others that surrounds *The Shack* – using the controversy as an object lesson for us to learn from and apply to the rest of our lives.

Now, I want to talk about two aspects of judging others; first judging motives and second, judging methods. Let me start with judging motives by going back to look at what our friendly blogger said.

Judging Motives

If you like The Shack, let's see what he has to say about your motives.

The Shack is full of false doctrine looked past by people [that's you!] who are emotionally swept out into the sea of deception. They look past the truth of God's Word because [this is where he talks about your motives] they want a god of their own making, one who fails to punish for sin unrepented of.

Do you see what he's saying here about your motives? If you like the book he says you "look past" false doctrine and the truth because you want a God of your own making. And on top of that he thinks that you are swept away by your emotions. How does that feel? Does that make you feel valued and respected? Does it make you want to open up to him and hear what he has to say? Or does it make you feel like he thinks you're a fool? It doesn't exactly make you feel warm and fuzzy toward him, does it?

Next, he attacks the motives of the author...

The primary source of this bad doctrine is because the trinity of The Shack Book is not the Trinity of the Bible. Rather it is the goddess Kali.

He implies that the author's motive is to deceive you into goddess worship. Then he goes back to questioning the reader's motive...

This is the book for you if you believe in a Universal salvation without seeking forgiveness, if you want a god who loves without logic, and if you don't know or don't care about biblical truth and sound doctrine. WatcherontheWall

Again, he says that people only like the book because they just want to make up a god that makes them feel good. Don't you hate it when people put words in your mouth and then judge you for it? You just can't win! Personally, it just shuts me down and makes me want to walk away because he's obviously more interested in proving me wrong and himself right than trying to help me. I just don't think that's the kind of person that Jesus wants us to be. That doesn't build up the church.

You see, when you judge someone's motives you are treading on sacred ground. You are making assessments about the core of their being and really, only God knows your heart. That's why the Bible says...

Be careful not to jump to conclusions...as to whether or not someone is faithful. When the Lord comes, he will bring our deepest secrets to light and will reveal our private motives.
1 Corinthians 4:4,5

And the sad thing about our blogger's criticism is that it's so contrary to what he should be doing. Instead of making character assassinations that hurt people and separate us he should be working to bring people together. The Bible tells us this...

God made known to us the mystery of his will...to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. Ephesians 1:9,10

If God's will is to bring everything *together* in Christ, then we should do the same. We shouldn't be working at separating from each other but coming together.

I'm embarrassed to admit it but when I was new to the faith I prided myself on being a radical Christian and felt the need to separate myself from other believers that weren't as committed as I was. And I enjoyed pointing out how other churches weren't following Jesus like my church was.

But as I got older I realized how arrogant that was. I was so misguided that I actually thought God was proud of my passion for "truth." But over time I came to realize I was probably breaking his heart. I wonder if there's anyone here who is doing what I was doing? The truth is, we probably *all* do it to some extent.

I came across another blog this week that cautioned people about the controversy surrounding *The Shack*. The writer offers some excellent tips about how we should talk about people that we disagree with. This is just one of seven points he made...

Be careful about disparaging The Shack's author, William P Young. Please be cautious about assigning motives to a person you don't know...

Now, I like what he says here because he gives Young the benefit of the doubt.

Mr. Young apparently was deeply wounded by Christians who should have protected him. I don't believe Mr. Young ... set out with sinister motives to undermine theological orthodoxy. He is a fellow wounded traveler trying to reconcile his woundedness.

Did you see that? He called him a "fellow traveler". He claimed him as a brother and not an enemy. I like that. He continues...

When his theology goes astray I am suggesting that we gracefully point out those areas and not attack Mr. Young. Defending truth with grace is always the most effective tactic. But our passion for truth too often makes grace the first thing we jettison. daveburchett.com

He says, *our passion for truth too often makes grace the first thing we jettison*. Why is that? Why is it that some Christians think that it's okay to get ugly when they think someone is wrong? It's so ironic. They accuse people of not following the Bible but that's exactly what they do in being harsh and critical. They sin by the way they call others sinners.

You see, even if we are right in our judgments we still need to be careful in what we say to people and the Bible is clear about how to correct someone.

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.
Galatians 6:1

Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them. Ephesians 4:29

My point here is that we should be careful not to judge people's motives. Let's give people the benefit of the doubt. Let's believe that their motives are pure and that they mean the best until proven otherwise. The Bible tells us that love hopes all things, believes all things, and endures all things. It tells us that love is *not* rude (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). That's how we want to be

treated so let's make sure we treat others with that same level of respect. When people come into our midst they should be amazed at our kindness. They should see that we respect everyone, even those that we disagree with. That's a good testimony for us to have.

Judging Methods

Now, the second way people misjudge others is by judging their *methods*. Some people are convinced that God only uses certain methods and if you don't use *their* methods then you are wrong. I'm very aware of this aspect of judging because I've been criticized for just about every method we either do or don't use! When we started Cedarbrook we purposefully quit using old methods that we thought were no longer helpful and introduced new methods that we thought *were* helpful. Our methods helped us reach all kinds of people but not everyone liked our methods!

One of the criticisms I've heard about *The Shack* is that it rarely mentions the Bible. In other words, if the book isn't full of Bible quotes then the author probably isn't really a Christian and he's up to something evil. In their mind there is a proper method for writing a Christian book and it involves quoting the Bible a lot. But is that true? I mean, if it is, we should know that. But if it's not, then we shouldn't be intimidated by people who make that implication.

Now, I want to take a few minutes to dive into a story in the Bible that might help us here. In fact, this is a story that I've been wanting to talk about for years but just haven't had the opportunity. I think it will help you understand better why we choose the methods we do here at Cedarbrook.

The book of Acts in the New Testament tells the story of the early church. The apostle Paul is going from town to town telling people about Jesus and He uses different methods based on who he's speaking to.

The believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea where they went to the Jewish synagogue. ... The Bereans were eager to hear what Paul and Silas said and studied the Scriptures every day to find out if these things were true. So, many of them believed...Acts 17:10-12

People point to this verse and say...*See, this is the biblical method for preaching. You take people through the Bible and they believe.*

In fact, many churches call themselves The Berean Bible Church for this reason. They are proud of their love for the Bible like the Bereans. But my response is, "*That's great, but that's only one model. You need to keep reading...*"

Paul leaves Berea and heads down the road to Athens. He's in the big city now with a totally different culture. In Berea, he was among fellow Jews. Now, he's among non-Jews, people who worship other gods.

While Paul was ... in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. Acts 17:15

More accurately, he was ticked. That's what the word *distressed* means. He was mad at the people for not worshipping the true God. Then it says...

Paul ... had a debate with some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. ...Then they took him to the Council of Philosophers. "Come and tell us more about this new religion," they said. "You are saying some rather startling things, and we want to know what it's all about." Acts 17:18-21

This culture was a blend of every kind of religion and philosophy. To them, the God of the Bible was weird. They had never heard anything like it. So Paul had to make some major shifts in his method if he was going to engage them in a discussion about Jesus. And this is what he says...watch what he does...it's brilliant...

So Paul, standing before the Council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious, Acts 17:22

First, notice his approach. He doesn't blast them for worshipping idols, even though we know he was mad. Instead, he gives them the benefit of the doubt and affirms them for being religious. Then he uses that compliment as a way to share his message...

As I was walking along I saw your many altars. And one of them had this inscription on it, 'To an Unknown God.' You have been worshipping him without knowing who he is, and now I wish to tell you about him. "

Do you see what he did here? He saw a statue to an unknown god and said,

Hey, you don't know the name of that god? Well, I do! Let me tell you about him.

And then he goes on to explain God to them in terms that they can understand. You can go home and read what he said but you'll notice something interesting.

He never once quotes the Bible!

With the Jews in Berea he studied the Bible. But with the Greeks in Athens he didn't. Why? Because they didn't value the Bible. The Bible wasn't truth to them. It wasn't a point of reference for them. But look what he does...

For in him we live and move and exist. As one of your own poets says, 'We are his offspring.'

Instead of quoting the Bible Paul quotes one of their pagan poets to affirm his message. Then this is how he finishes his sermon...

God commands everyone everywhere to turn away from idols and turn to him. For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead." Acts 17:28-31

Not only didn't he quote the Bible, he *never mentioned Jesus' name*. He refers to Jesus as "the man". Can you imagine if I preached a sermon and never once quoted the Bible or mentioned the name of Jesus? I mean, that's like blasphemy! You'd probably fire me!

I told you that a lot of churches like to name themselves after the Bereans. But I've never seen a church that named itself after the Athenians. Why is that? Well, I think it's because we're not so sure of Paul's method. It makes us uncomfortable. We're afraid he might have had an off day

and missed God's will. We don't want to endorse such a radical method and risk being wrong. So we do what's safe and make sure that we have a Bible verse attached to everything we do.

But that's my point. Be careful how you judge methods. Be careful with your assumptions about what methods are "right" and which are "wrong". We shouldn't be doing things out of fear of being wrong. That's not what it means to be led by the Spirit.

Paul quoted the Bible to those who knew the Bible. That's one method. And he quoted pagan poets to those that didn't know the Bible. That's another method. Both methods were right and there are probably a number of other methods as well.

The "right" method is the method that communicates the message best.

Do you see that? And *the method is always subject to the message* and not the other way around. That means that the audience determines the method used and not what you've always done, or what has worked in the past or what will keep your critics happy but ...what will reach people the best.

Paul Young let his audience determine his method. We need to remember that Young wasn't writing a book of theology for church people. He was writing to people who have been put off by the church, don't understand the Bible and have been wounded in some way. They aren't looking for a bunch of Bible verses. So he adopted a method that would reach these people. And he did a good job of it, reaching millions of millions of people. If he backed up every thought in the book with a Bible verse, it would have totally changed the nature of the book and he would have lost his audience. It would have read more like a theology book (which would have made the church people happy but lost the effect).

So be careful how you judge both motives and methods in *The Shack*. But more importantly, I hope you'll take what I said today and apply it to every person in your life that you might disagree with. Cut them some slack. Believe the best about them. Give them the benefit of the doubt. And if you must confront them, do it with the utmost of respect and with the goal of building them up and not tearing them down.

Prayer; Father I ask you to forgive us for our divisive attitudes. In our pride we have set ourselves up as judge and jury, not only condemning people but slandering their good name. We've done the opposite of what Jesus prayed for us. While he prayed for unity we have brought division and we see how it reflects so poorly on you and your church. Help us to have the courage to explore new ideas without feeling the need to attack. And give us the wisdom and compassion we need to confront those we think are in error. Amen.

Going Deeper

Use these questions for personal reflection or to discuss with friends, family members or your small group.

1. Talk about a time when your motives were judged by someone else. How did that feel? How did it affect your relationship with that person? Did it affect your relationship with God?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 4:4,5. Paul had been judged by some people as not being very spiritual. How did he answer his critics?
3. Read Galatians 6:1,2. When someone has truly fallen into sin how should we approach their condition? See also 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.
4. Have you ever had someone criticize your method of doing something (even though the result was good)? Describe that situation and how you felt about it.
5. Read Acts 17:10-25. How did Paul's method differ when he went from Jews to Greeks?
6. Paul reasoned with Jews through scripture to prove his point. He reasoned with Greeks with logic, never once mentioning the Bible or Jesus. Does that surprise you? Does it change your idea of the "right" methods that people should use?
7. What is it that convinces you that truth is being spoken or not? See Matthew 7:15-20.
8. In talking about The Shack or anyone with whom you might disagree, what are some things to keep in mind (based on this study)?

Finding God in The Shack

Part Three: *The Great Sadness*

By Remy Diederich

Cedarbrook Church

Welcome to my series called *Finding God in the Shack*. I'm taking several weeks to look at some of the themes in this book. If you are new here today, *The Shack* is a New York Times bestselling book about a man that experiences a terrible tragedy and then has an incredible encounter with God that heals his pain. Since so many people have read the book I thought it would be good to look at what the Bible has to say about these themes.

Today I want to dive into one of the main themes in the book; *The Great Sadness*. This is a term the authored used to describe the devastating depression that happened to some of the family members after the youngest girl in the family died. People don't like to talk about their sadness. No one wants to admit they have it. But it must be out there with all the people buying the book.

On Palm Sunday I preached a message called *Afflicted and Fainting*. It was about how to deal with the bad things that come our way and it was one of the most downloaded sermons I've preached. That surprised me. But that tells me that there's more pain out there than we realize. If we could monitor how much pain is in this room today we'd be shocked. Although most of us are smiling some of us are hiding some deep pain. The person on your right or you left might not be as happy as they look. And so, although talking about our sadness a tough topic, it's important. So let's see what we can learn today.

The Great Sadness settled on Mackenzie Phillips and one of his daughters when Missy, the youngest child, was kidnapped at a campsite and then murdered. This is how the book describes the onset of The Great Sadness in Mack's life;

...sitting down on the edge of the bed, he was swept helplessly away in the unrelenting and merciless grip of growing despair, slowly rocking back and forth. Soul-shredding sobs and groans clawed to the surface from the core of his being...

...in one day he had spent a years worth of emotions and now he felt numb, adrift in a suddenly meaningless world that felt like it would be forever gray. P. 53,54

And then it describes how the Great Sadness affected Missy's sister...

Kate seemed to have been affected the most, disappearing into a shell, like a turtle protecting its soft underbelly from anything potentially dangerous. It seemed that she would only poke her head out when she felt fully safe, which was becoming less and less often...

Attempts at conversations would turn into one-way monologues, with sounds bouncing off her stone visage. It was as if something had died inside her, and now was slowly infecting her from the inside, spilling out occasionally in bitter words or emotionless silence. Page 64

Maybe you can relate to these feelings. But if you can't I hope you'll still pay attention today because The Great Sadness can happen to anyone if you aren't careful.

Let me tell you what I mean by that by describing how The Great Sadness comes about. The Great Sadness starts with an event in your life that blindsides you. This event comes out of nowhere and strips you of something valuable, something that you felt was essential to life, something you thought you couldn't live without.

The events are different things for different people. It might be some kind of chronic pain or health condition. It could be a failed relationship, like a marriage that goes sour or a child that turns against the family. Or it could be a series of miscarriages or an abusive past that you just can't seem to overcome. Many times it comes from the death of a loved one like it was in *The Shack*.

I've got a diagram to describe what happens. It's like this...we all have expectations for how we think our lives should go. For a few of us, our life does a good job of measuring up. It might even exceed our expectations. But for most of we live with a shortfall. There's a gap between what we expect and what we get.

What we expect

GAP

What we get

And this difference creates tension or what we call *dissonance*. Dissonance is a discord or disharmony. It's that feeling we get when things just aren't right in our life. We want so much to make our expectations and our reality to be one but they refuse.

Dissonance involves a few emotions;

- Anger- Anger is the emotion that says, "That's not fair. That's not right. Life shouldn't be this way."
- Sadness – or depression – Sadness happens when we realize that we lost something that we don't think we can live without. And so we grieve that loss.
- Fear – This is when we are afraid that whatever is wrong will either happen again or get worse.

So we've got these three emotions eating away at us creating this dissonance. If the difference between what we expect and what we get is small, then we might simply be a little irritable. For example, right now in our yard we have a psycho Robin creating me some dissonance. He keeps seeing himself in the reflection of our windows and so he attacks the window thinking that he's attacking another bird. He tends to like to do it at 6:30 a.m. as well as throughout the day. And when he can't get in one window he tries the other windows. But to add to my dissonance he drops a little gift in front of the window and so now all around my house I have these little mounds of psycho Robin poop!

I've got a little anger going towards that bird. I'm grieving the loss of a house that should be peaceful. And I fear that this is going to go on all summer or his buddies might join him. So I've got some dissonance. And that's my point. We all struggle with dissonance at some level. We've all got things in our lives that don't go according to plan and we just deal with it.

But sometimes the distance between what you expect in life and what actually happens is extreme, like in *The Shack*, and there's no immediate solution, or worse yet, the situation is permanent. It's not going away, like a death or a divorce and it leaves you believing that life can never be good again. From now on you are convinced that your life will only be a shadow of what was or what you thought life would be.

But even as painful as this situation may be, it isn't necessarily The Great Sadness...yet. The Great Sadness involves something more. The Great sadness results when you not only experience the dissonance I talked about- the anger, depression and fear - but when *you feel like God has abandoned you in your pain*.

Some might even think that God is punishing them. I remember talking to a woman who had a series of miscarriages and she was convinced that God was punishing her for her past. She took a painful situation and made it worse by speculating about God's intentions. She believed the worst about God and it was crushing to her.⁴

⁴ The good news is that after praying with her to find God's truth for her life she sensed that God was NOT punishing her and he only had compassion for her. Her whole countenance changed and was able to enter into a joyful relationship with Jesus for the first time.

In *The Shack*, Mack does something similar. He accuses God of abandoning him. Mack had gone to the shack half hoping to meet God and have his questions answered about the death of his daughter. But when he got there it was empty and his emotions all came to the surface. This is what it says...

Finally his heart exploded like a flash flood, releasing his pent-up anger and letting it rush down the rocky canyons of his emotions. Turning his eyes heavenward, he began screaming his anguished questions. 'Why? Why did you let this happen?' ...In a blind rage, Mack grabbed the nearest chair and flung it at the window. It smashed into pieces. He picked up one of the legs and began destroying everything he could. Groans and moans of despair and fury spat through his lips as he beat his wrath into this terrible place. "I hate you!" In a frenzy he pounded out his rag until he was exhausted and spent...

Even in his exhaustion the anger seethed, and he once again took aim at the indifferent God he imagined somewhere beyond the roof of the shack. "God, you couldn't even let us find her and bury her properly. Was that just too much to ask?"

As the mix of emotions ebbed and flowed, his anger giving way to pain, a fresh wave of sorrow began to mix with his confusion. "So where are you? I thought you wanted to meet me here. Well, I'm here, God, And you? You're nowhere to be found. You've never been around when I've needed you – not when I was a little boy, not when I lost Missy. Not now! Some; Papa' you are!" page 78,79

So Mack's Great Sadness didn't just result from what happened to his daughter. There was a spiritual component to his sadness and God gently points that out as you read through the book. At one point God says...

The real underlying flaw in your life, Mackenzie, is that you don't think that I am good. If you knew I was good and that everything ...is all covered by my goodness, then while you might not always understand what I am doing, you would trust me. But you don't." page 126

You see, Mack's lack of trust in God's goodness is the exposed nerve of this whole story. A little bit later in the book Mack meets with Sophia. Sophia is the personification of God's Wisdom. And when Mack expresses his anger she too confronts him about this issue of trust...

Isn't this where you are stuck, Mackenzie? Isn't this what fuels The Great Sadness? That God cannot be trusted? Page 161

If you are struggling with The Great Sadness today, do you think that might have something to do with it – that you don't trust God's goodness? That deep down you don't really believe that God has your best interests in mind? That's what makes The Great Sadness so great. It's much more than being depressed. It's that you don't trust God's love or goodness. It looks like this:

Dissonance from some loss + No Trust in God = The Great Sadness

You see, whenever things go wrong in our lives it's so easy to speculate and project evil on God. We ask all kinds of questions.

*Is God punishing me for something I did? Is God trying to teach me a lesson?
Did God cause my pain? Or if he didn't cause it, then why did he allow it?
He could have prevented it from happening. Doesn't he care?*

But instead of speculating on what we don't know about God I think the key to preventing The Great Sadness is to cling to what we do know about God. Let me list just a few things that we know about God.

First, we know that God cares for the afflicted. In the book of Exodus God's people were suffering under the weight of the Pharaoh's cruelty but then God spoke and said...

I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey--...

And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt. Exodus 3:7-10

God sees our pain. He hears our cries and he eventually takes action. It may not be what you want or when you want it, but he will take action on your behalf. This is the picture of God throughout the Bible. In fact, that's why Jesus came into the world. The Bible tells us that God loved us so much that he sent Jesus to rescue us.

Second, we know that God is good. David wrote a song that said...

Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him. Psalm 34:8

David tells us that when we have problems we can turn to God because he is good. He's saying, "Check God out. Don't assume he's against you. Go to him with your pain and see that he is good. See that you CAN take refuge in him and find healing."

And the apostle John wrote a church telling them...

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 1 John 1:5

If there is no darkness in God that means that there is no evil. There is nothing harmful. There is nothing questionable. So even though we can't know everything there is to know about God, John gives us a blanket understanding of God...in him there is no darkness because God is light. You can bank on that. There's no need to speculate that there is anything other than light there.

Third, we know that God loves us and nothing can separate us from his love. Paul wrote the Roman church asking them this...

Can anything separate us from the love Christ has for us? Can troubles or problems or sufferings or hunger or nakedness or danger or violent death? ...But in all these things we have full victory through God who showed his love for us.

Yes, I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruling spirits, nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing above us, nothing below us, nor anything else in the whole world will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:33-39

Notice that Christ's love doesn't PREVENT bad things from happening. But it ASSURES us that when bad things happen, God is with us. You haven't been abandoned.

Now there are many things we don't know about God. We don't know why God doesn't intervene more often in sickness and famine and war and poverty and human trafficking and every other kind of evil. We don't know why some people are spared while others are not. But that's where we have to show control over our thinking and simply say,

I don't know why these things are but instead of speculating on what I don't know about God I'm going to cling to what I do know about God.

It takes faith to be able to believe the best about God. It's hard to get up every day and face the same pain you faced yesterday without wondering why God doesn't do something. But believing the worst about God only adds to your pain. Not only does that shut God out of your life, leaving you alone at the most painful time of your life, but you lose your moral compass as well.

I've seen people do some pretty regrettable things when they were mad at God. They turn to drugs or drinking, they have affairs, they waste their money, they quit their job, they turn to pornography...and then when their life gets even worse- which it always does - they blame God for that too. Their life goes from bad to worse all because they chose to project evil on God rather than believe what they knew was true. So, as hard as it is to trust God's goodness, trusting his goodness is what's going to help you overcome The Great Sadness.

There's a story in the book of Genesis that shows the kind of faith I'm talking about. God brought Abraham through an experience that proved to Abraham that God could be trusted. To some people it is the most terrifying story in the Bible. Let's take a look.

God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, ... "Take your son, your only son. Sacrifice him on one of the mountains I will tell you about." Genesis 22:1,2

Now, this is crazy. God tells him to sacrifice his son just like the pagan gods did in that day. These two sentences are all some people need to speculate all kinds of evil about God. But Abraham doesn't flinch. He never once pushes back and objects. He doesn't project evil intentions on God. He simply trusts God and obeys. Listen to how "matter of fact" this story is told, as if it was just another day serving God...

Early the next morning Abraham got up. He put a saddle on his donkey. He took two of his servants and his son Isaac with him. He cut enough wood for the burnt offering. Then he started out for the place God had told him about.

They reached the place God had told Abraham about. There Abraham built an altar. He arranged the wood on it. He tied up his son Isaac. He placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand. He took the knife to kill his son. Genesis 22:9,10

There's no doubt that Abraham was going to follow through on this. He knew that God gave him his son.⁵ He knew that he loved his son. I'm sure he didn't know why God had asked him to do this terrible thing but he refused to speculate on what he didn't know about God and chose to believe what he knew was true about God. And look what happens...

But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven. He said, "Abraham! Abraham!" ... "Do not lay a hand on the boy," "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you have respect for God. You have not held back from me your son, your only son."

And then God shows Abraham a ram that he can use to sacrifice instead. A lot of people have looked at this story and said, "That's just sick. What a terrible way to test Abraham's faith. What kind of maniacal God is this?" But that's what I'm talking about here today...don't speculate on what you don't know about God. Trust in what you do know about God. That's what Abraham did.

And trust brought blessing (as compared to how distrust brought more problems).

I will bless you because of what you have done," announces the Lord. "You have not held back your son, your only son. "So I will certainly bless you. I will make your children after you as many as the stars in the sky. I will make them as many as the grains of sand on the seashore. Your children will take over the cities of their enemies. All nations on earth will be blessed because of your children. All of that will happen because you have obeyed me." Genesis 22:16-18

I think when you shift from speculating on what you don't know about God and choose to trust in what you do know about God, you just might have a breakthrough in The Great Sadness.

That's what happened in *The Shack*. Mack is complaining to Sophia about Missy's death. So Sophia tells Mack what he needs to do. She says...

Give up being God's judge and know Papa for who he is. Then you will be able to embrace his love in the midst of your pain, ...Mack stood up from the chair. "I don't want to be a judge any more. I really do want to trust Papa."

Unnoticed by Mack, the room lightened ... "But I'll need your help." Sophia reached out and hugged Mack. "Now that sounds like the start of the trip home Mackenzie." page 165

The start of the trip home. She's talking about the beginning of his inner healing of The Great Sadness. When Mack chose to stop speculating on what he didn't know about God and chose to trust in what he did know about his healing began. That was the turning point for him in getting over the Great Sadness. He stopped judging God and started to trust him. He stopped projecting evil on God and allowed God's goodness back into his life.

And the healing began.

⁵ You might know that his son, Isaac, was the son of promise that he had waited years for. Isaac was the son of blessing through whom God's lineage would continue through. To kill Isaac would be to undo all that God had previously done and promised.

If you are experiencing The Great Sadness, I wonder if the healing could start today for you too. What if you quit speculating about what you don't know about God and start trusting in what you do know about him?

You see, the pain of great loss is bad enough as it is. Don't let your speculations about God make it worse. Don't let it isolate you and cut you off from God. Now is the time that *you need* to be surrounded by God's love and goodness. You can't afford to go this alone.

The only way you can overcome the Great Sadness is to experience God's Great Goodness.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his decisions, and his unquestionable are his methods! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has dared to be his advisor?" "Who has ever told God what to do, that God should be indebted for their advice?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. Romans 11:33-36

Prayer: Father, please forgive us for speculating about the things we don't know about you and not trusting in the things we do know about you. God we know that you love us. We know that you are good. We know that you care for us. Help us to believe these things in the midst of our pain. Help us to allow your love and goodness to come into our life, surround us and start the healing. And for those here today that might not know you give them the courage to invite you into their life and follow you every day. Amen.

Going Deeper

Use these questions for personal reflections or to discuss with your family, friends or small group.

1. Define dissonance. Where is there dissonance in your life right now?
2. Define The Great Sadness.
3. Based on the sermon, finish this equation: The Great Sadness = Dissonance + ___? ___
Do you agree or disagree with this equation? How would you modify it to make it better?
4. Have you ever experienced The Great Sadness or known someone who has? Describe what that was like (or maybe is like right now).
5. What kind of negative speculation is often projected on God during The Great Sadness? Why do you think that is?
6. Remy said that in times of darkness we need to cling to what we know about God and not to speculate about what we don't know. What do you know about God? Do you have Bible verses to back that up?
7. Consider these verses. What do they help us know about God that might encourage us in times of Great Sadness?
 - a. Lamentations 3:25
 - b. Psalm 86:5
 - c. Ephesians 3:17-19

8. Read Genesis 22:1-12. What can you learn from Abraham and Isaac in regard to trusting God's character?

Finding God in The Shack

Part Four: *The Personal God*

By Remy Diederich

Cedarbrook Church, Memomonie, WI

I had a great conversation with a group of people recently. I asked them to talk about their experience in trying to connect with God; the good the bad and the ugly. There was no right or wrong experience. I just wanted to hear what was on their minds.

It was fascinating to hear the variety of responses. Some people felt they had a strong connection with God. Some said they had a connection years ago but somehow lost it. While others said they didn't get God at all and had no idea how to make a connection.

I really appreciated the honesty and transparency in what they shared. You know, the more I talk to people, the more I realize that most people have problems connecting with God to some degree. I don't think there are any experts that I know about when it comes to God. I'm sure not.

In fact, I've been asking people for years what keeps them from connecting with God and I've got a list here of some of the more common answers.

1. *It's hard to relate to someone that's invisible.*
2. *Past bad experiences.* Some people grew up with parents who were hypocrites. They went right from the church to the bar and spent the rest of the day there. Other's had a bad church experience. Or maybe suffered some kind of tragedy. When bad things happen to you it often puts a wall between you and God.
3. *You are afraid of not doing it right.* A lot of us are intimidated by what we think is the process of relating to God. We assume we are doing it wrong and God is going to disqualify us for breaking the rules so we don't even try.
4. *You don't have anyone to show you the way.* You don't have any model to follow.
5. *You fear connecting with God only to be judged.* Like, why bother connecting with God when you know he is just going to condemn you for the life you've been living? The next one is close...
6. *You're afraid of not being good enough.* You aren't necessarily afraid of being judged, you just don't think you are worthy of connecting with God...like God only deals with the top 10% of the class or the morally perfect.
7. *You struggle with taking a step of faith.* Some of us are very concrete by nature. We don't trust in anything that can't be scientifically quantified and proven.

Now, there are probably lots of other reasons why people don't connect with God but those are some that people have told me about. You might want to just circle the obstacle that you struggle with the most and then be thinking and praying about it.

But the other day when I was talking to the group I mentioned before, one person said that they never believed in God at all growing up. Either the people they knew were hypocrites or they were cynics, scoffing at faith. Neither group helped them understand God. But then someone gave this person a copy of the book, *The Shack*. And that book opened them up to see God in a way they had never seen God before. It was so fun to listen to this person talk because you could tell they really got it. They told me how the book convinced them that God loved them unconditionally. Isn't that something? After four decades of being disconnected from God and then God uses a book to make it all clear.

Well, if you are new here today I'm in the middle of a series of sermons about that book, *The Shack*. I'm calling it, *Finding God in the Shack*. The book tells the story of a man whose daughter is murdered in a mountain shack and then finds healing through an encounter with God in that same shack. Today is part four, and I want to talk about how to connect with a personal God.

I think one of the big reasons that *The Shack* helps people connect with God is because Mack – the main character in the book - doesn't have all the answers. People can identify with someone like that. They can identify with someone who struggles with their faith. And Mack struggled all his life trying to figure out God. He even spent a few years in seminary hoping he'd have a breakthrough but he ended up dropping out frustrated at the seminary for making God so complicated.

To add to his frustration Mack's wife's relationship with God was effortless and intimate. She felt so close and connected to God that when she prayed she called God "Papa". Does it ever bother you when other people seem to understand God better than you do? They make it look so easy while you are pulling your hair out? You wonder what's wrong with you. Why can't you sense God like they can? One person told me that they thought they were missing the "God gene" and that's why they couldn't connect with God. But that's not true. We can all connect with God. Some just have to work at it a little harder than others.

But as we get into the story of *The Shack* we start to see the root of Mack's disconnect. It's not that he has a spiritual learning disability or is missing the God gene. The problem was with his father. Let me read what happened in Mack's family from the first pages of the book.

Although externally religious, his overly strict church-elder father was a closet drinker, especially when the rain didn't come or came too early, and most of the times in between. Mack never talks much about him, but when he does his face loses emotion like a tide going out, leaving dark and lifeless eyes. [Mack's dad] was not a fall asleep happy kind of alcoholic but a vicious mean beat your wife and then ask God for forgiveness drunk.

Then it goes on to describe a time when ...

For almost two days, tied to the big oak at the back of the house, he was beaten with a belt and Bible verses every time his dad woke from a stupor and put down his bottle. The Shack, page 2.

After this beating he ran away from home and lived with a chip on his shoulder against both his dad and God. This is one of those past experiences I was talking about that blocks us from God.

The death of Mack's daughter only made things worse, ...

The tragedy ... increased the rift in Mack's ...relationship with God,

You know, if you are having trouble connecting with God I hope you will take some time to look at your past and consider what might be hanging you up because God wants to bring you through that. I think reading *The Shack* is a great way to process this.

But now look at what it says Mack's response was to his disconnect with God...

[Mack] ignored this growing sense of separation. Instead, he tried to embrace a stoic, unfeeling faith... (page 65).

Isn't that what a lot of us do when we fail to connect with God? We just settle for less. We tell ourselves that believing in God is what's important. We don't have to feel anything or experience anything. So, we shrug our shoulders and just put our spirituality on cruise control. We go to church. We go through the motions and call it good.

Well, that's what Mack did. But in spite of doing this, Mack longed for something more. Something real.

But in spite of his anger and depression, Mack knew that he needed some answers. He realized he was stuck, and Sunday prayers and hymns weren't cutting it anymore, if they ever really had. ..He was sick of God and god's religion, sick of all the little religious social clubs that didn't seem to make any real difference or affect any real changes. Yes, Mack wanted more,The Shack, page 66

So, even though Mack struggles to know God and often wants to give up on God, there's something in him that keeps seeking after God. That's why when Mack gets a note in the mail from "Papa" to meet him at the Shack, the place where his daughter was murdered, he feels compelled to go.

It seems both crazy and risky, but if there was any chance at all that he could encounter God at the Shack then he wasn't going to let the opportunity slip by.

So Mack drives up into the mountains to the shack. At first it appears empty, but then he meets God. I love this picture...

...he looked directly into the face of a large beaming African-American woman. Instinctively he jumped back, but he was too slow. With speed that belied her size, she crossed the distance between them and engulfed him in her arms, lifting him clear off his feet and spinning him around like a little child.

And all the while she was shouting his name – “Mackenzie Allen Phillips” – with the ardor of someone seeing a long-lost and deeply –loved relative. She finally put him back on earth and, with her hands on his shoulders, pushed him back as if to get a good look at him.

Mack, look at you!” she fairly exploded...It is so wonderful to have you here with us. My, my, my how I do love you! And with that she wrapped herself around him again. The Shack, page 83

Mack is taken aback and immediately his emotions come to the surface and God says...

It’s okay honey, you can let it all out...I know you’ve been hurt, and I know you’re angry and confused. So, go ahead and let it out. It does a soul good to let the waters run once in a while – the healing waters.

But Mack didn’t want to go there yet. He wasn’t ready to make himself vulnerable, so Papa says...

Not ready? That’s okay, we’ll do things on your terms and time. The Shack, page 83

So that began Mack’s two day encounter with God, or “Papa”, as the book refers to him...or her...or, whatever!

Now, some people get all bent out of shape that God is presented as a woman but they are missing the point. God manifested to Mack as a woman because of Mack’s bad experience with his dad. God knew what kept Mack from connecting with him. It was the painful image of his father. So God removed the barrier by appearing as a woman. (As just an aside, we know, don’t we, that God is neither male nor female? Sometimes that confuses people. God is Spirit. I hope to talk about that before this series is over.)

That’s one of the things that *The Shack* shows over and over again -that God will do whatever he needs to do to help us take the next step toward him. God doesn’t draw a hard line and say,

If you want to connect with me then you have to do A, B and C.

You know, *you have to pray a certain way and attend a certain church and read a certain Bible and do it all in a certain amount of time.* No. God takes us where we are at and works with us according to what we need.

It’s like if you take piano lessons or golf lessons. The instructor doesn’t treat everyone the same. She assesses your skill and works with you where you are at. She doesn’t condemn you for being a beginner. Or for having bad form. She doesn’t roll her eyes and shake her head with disgust like it’s beneath her to work with you. No, she takes you where you’re at and works with you from there.

Connecting with God is the same way. God doesn’t care how little you know about him or how bad of a person you are. He’s just happy that you want to know him and start to acknowledge him in your life. So don’t beat yourself up if you are just getting started with God. There’s no shame in being a beginner. There’s no shame in not being perfect.

Now, *The Shack* makes God sound all nice. But it's a book of fiction. So, my question is: is it really reflective of the God of the Bible? Or is it just a bunch of wishful thinking? Are we just making up a god that we like? That's a question that we should all be asking.

God accepts us where we are at.

Well, I think *The Shack* reflects the God of the Bible (mostly). And I say that because Jesus showed us the same qualities that we see God has in *The Shack*. For example, Jesus accepts us where we are at. When you read the Bible you see that Jesus never kept someone at a distance just because they weren't religious enough or good enough.

I love the story of Zaccheus. Here's a greedy tax collector...totally out to line his pockets, but he's curious about this man named Jesus and so he climbs a tree to get a good view of Jesus preaching. And what do you know; Jesus points him out of the crowd and tells him that he wants to go to his house for lunch.

Jesus ... looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" Luke 19:5-7

Zaccheus was probably despised by every other religious leader but Jesus wants to sit down and share a meal with him. And, as some of you know, sharing a meal with someone in the Mideast is no small thing. It's a sign of friendship and total acceptance. So Jesus accepted Zaccheus right where he was at and he'll do the same with you.

God loves us unconditionally.

A similar quality that Jesus showed was that he loves us unconditionally. The thing that shocked everyone about Jesus was that he wasn't afraid to hang out with sinners or to risk tarnishing his image. Listen to how Mark describes it...

That night Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to be his dinner guests, along with his fellow tax collectors and many other notorious sinners. (There were many people of this kind among the crowds that followed Jesus.) Mark 2:15

I was reading about a guy who started a church on the Las Vegas strip and he purposefully reaches out to people that you wouldn't normally find in church. In an interview he was asked if people on the Strip were interested in Jesus he said...

Just because a person goes to a porn show or out with a hooker doesn't mean he has no interest in Jesus. Craig Gross, Leadership Magazine, Spring 2009

We tend to overlook that, don't we? We tend to think that people who do bad things are all bad. But just because someone has some bad things going on inside of them doesn't mean they don't long for something good. In fact, the truth might be the opposite. If a person is full of bad things they might be more hungry than ever for something good.

Maybe that's where you're at today. Maybe you've gotten involved in some bad things but just remember that Jesus will take you right where you are at. You don't have to clean up your act before you turn to him. His love is unconditional.

God is personal.

But the one thing that stands out in all the stories about Jesus is how personal he is. Jesus isn't just talking to the masses. He's meeting with people one on one, calling them by name and dealing with their specific problems. I think those stories are there on purpose. He wants us to know that he knows our name and our specific problems.

But we really struggle with that concept, don't we? We are so quick to think that God is far off in heaven and he's only mildly aware of us and only possibly concerned. But the stories about Jesus tell us something different.

You see, whether we realize it or not, we were created for relationship with God, not for the rules and rituals that make up religion. I got a kick out of something Mack said to Jesus in *The Shack*. Jesus is explaining how the Father, Son and Spirit all want to be in relationship with Mack. He says...

We want you to join us in our circle of relationship. I don't want slaves to do my will; I want brothers and sisters who will share life with me.

This starts to sink into Mack and he begins to realize what a shallow faith he's had and says...

And all I wanted was a God who will just fix everything so no one gets hurt. *The Shack*, page 146

Is that the God you are looking for...just a God that will fix everything for you so no one gets hurt? Just a god to solve your problems? God has so much more than that for us. In fact the Bible quotes Jesus as saying that he wants to be our *friend*.

I'm no longer calling you servants because servants don't understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I've named you friends because I've let you in on everything I've heard from the Father. John 15:15

Think about that. What's a friend? A friend is someone that you know well and talk to on a regular basis. That's the kind of relationship that Jesus wants to have with us. That's not weird or spooky. Communicating with God should be normal for us. What's strange is that so many of us have lost the kind of intimacy that he created us for.

All through the Bible there are examples of God speaking to his people. That's why the Bible says things like, "The Lord spoke to Moses" and "The Lord spoke to David". God speaks all through the Bible to different people.

I like what John Eldridge says in his book *Walking with God*...

Now, if God doesn't also speak to us, why would he have given us these stories of him speaking to others? "Look – here are hundreds of inspiring and hopeful stories about how God spoke to his people in this and that situation. Isn't it amazing? But you can't have that. He doesn't speak like that anymore."

That makes no sense at all. Why would God give you a book of exceptions? This is how I used to relate to my people, but I don't do that anymore. What good would a book of

exceptions do you? That's like giving you the owner's manual for a Dodge even though you drive a Mitsubishi.

No, the Bible is a book of examples of what it looks like to walk with God. To say that he doesn't offer that to us is just so disheartening. It is also unbiblical. Page 14,15, Walking with God

You see, what people like about *The Shack* is the idea that you can hang out and talk to God. You can share your hang-ups with him. You can share your problems. You can even get mad at him without lightning striking and you can laugh with him too.

Well, here's a news flash. The relationship between Mack and God is just a picture of the kind of relationship that you can have with God. It's not fiction. It's not make believe. I'm not saying that you are going to walk into your kitchen tomorrow morning and find a large African American woman by the name of "Papa" cooking breakfast. But God still wants to communicate with you.

Listen to how Sarayu- who represents the Spirit- responds to Mack when he asks how things will change when he goes back to his real life. He asks, will I see you again? And Sarayu responds...

Of course. You might see me in a piece of art, or music, or silence, or through people, or in Creation, or in your joy and sorrow. My ability to communicate is limitless, living and transforming, and it will always be tuned to Papa's goodness and love. And you will hear and see me in the bible in fresh ways. Just don't look for rules and principles; look for relationship- a way of coming to be with us. Page 198

You see, you weren't created to live life on your own. You were created to be in a daily dialogue with God. So if that's not happening in your life you are missing out! God is speaking to you every day words of encouragement and words of correction and direction and wisdom. He wants to help you sort through your life. But if you want to hear those words then you need to draw close to him. The bible says,

Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. James 4:8

So, whether you've known God all your life or today is the first day you've heard about God, I hope you'll draw close to him. Push aside all those obstacles I talked about in the beginning today and let his love fill your life.

There's a place in *The Shack* after Mack has gained a level of healing and he asks Jesus...

So what do I do now?

And Jesus responds.

What you're already doing, Mack, learning to live loved...We're meant to experience this life, your life, together, in a dialogue, sharing the journey. You get to share in our wisdom and learn to love with our love, and we get...to hear you grumble and gripe and complain! p. 175

And so that's my challenge to you today. Learn how to live loved by drawing close to the personal God.

Prayer; Father, you know our hearts. You know what keeps us from you. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for accepting us where we are at and loving us unconditionally. And thank you for being personal. God...the fact that you invite us to relate to you as friend is beyond comprehension. Help us to grasp that and not take it for granted. Help us to always want to take another step closer to you. And help us learn how to live loved. Amen.

Going Deeper

Use the following questions for personal reflection or discuss with your friends, family or small group.

1. What are some obstacles that have prevented you from connecting with God?
2. Why is fear so often a part of these obstacles?
3. What has God been most associated with for you; rules, rituals, religion, relationship? Why is that?
4. In *The Shack*, Mack's relationship with his dad hurt his relationship with God. Do you have a relationship that has hurt your ability to relate to God? One that has helped you connect with God?
5. Read the following and comment on how they might encourage you to relate to God:
 - Hebrews 10:15-22
 - James 4:8
 - Jeremiah 29:13
 - John 14:20
 - Revelation 3:20
6. Would you say that you have a relationship with God? Why or why not?
7. Describe how God has met you in personal ways (if he has).
8. What are some ways that you can make your relationship with God more personal?
9. Read John 14:26 and 16:7. What has God done to help us relate to him better?

Finding God in the Shack

Part Five: *Questioning the Character of God*

By Remy Diederich

Cedarbrook Church

5/24/09

When I say the word “God” what picture comes to mind? Or maybe I should say, *who* comes to mind? Maybe it’s a picture of a grandfatherly type person with a long beard. Or maybe you think of a picture of Jesus. Or maybe you just think of a bright light...like a force or a power.

Well, there’s a bestselling book out right now called *The Shack* and it forces us to rethink who God is and what he (or she, if you’ve read the book) looks like. And that’s what I want to talk about today... your view of God.

I’ve been talking about this book for a few weeks now. *The Shack* is about a man (Mack) whose daughter is brutally murdered and he finds healing by encountering God in a very personal way. But God, to Mack’s surprise, manifests in the form of three people: a large African American woman, Jesus and another woman; Sarayu. As confusing and even offensive as that might be...to both Mack as well as the reader...what I like about this book is that it challenges the reader to think about God in new ways – in fresh ways – and I think that’s a good thing.

Now, whether you agree with the book’s picture of God or not isn’t really the point. What I like about the book is that it makes us question our thoughts about God. You see, the best students...the ones that learn the most are the ones with the most questions. And so books that make you ask good questions are books that should be read.

There was a guy at Arbor Place recently – where I lead a group three days a week – who was constantly challenging me and questioning me as I taught. He did it so much that he started to apologize for it. He didn’t want me to think that he didn’t like me or didn’t agree with me. He just wanted to understand so he asked a lot of questions. I told him not to worry because I like questions. The best students ask lots of questions. I know that when people are questioning me that they are listening and trying to understand what I’m saying.

So, if you read *The Shack*, hopefully it will stir up lots of questions about God. And if you are wise, rather than being frustrated by the questions you’ll let those questions draw you into a deeper relationship with God- you’ll let them cause you to explore God in ways you never have before.

In fact, there are three questions about God that naturally arise from the book and that I want to talk about.

Is God male?

Are the Father, Son and Spirit all equal?

Is there a chain of command among the Father, Son and Spirit?

In other words, is someone calling the shots while the others listen and obey? I'll answer the first two questions today and then answer the third question in a couple of weeks.

Now, you might look at those three questions and say,

Who cares? That's just theology. The answers to those questions have no bearing on my life.

But, not so fast. How you answer those three questions will have a direct impact on your life. The fact is, how you view God directly impacts, not only how you live but, specifically, how you will treat other people. Did you realize that? So these questions are very relevant.

So, the first question; *Is God male?* In *The Shack*, Mack struggles with God manifesting as a woman, not only in the person of Papa but also Sarayu, who represents the Spirit. Papa explains that she appeared as a woman to help Mack overcome the pain of his abusive father. And then she says...

Mackenzie, I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature...To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes."

Then the book says about Mack...

He believed in his head at least, that God was a Spirit, neither male nor female, but in spite of that, he was embarrassed to admit to himself that all his visuals for God were very white and very male. The Shack, page 93

So, what about you? How do you think of God? At one level, it might seem like a silly question. Of course God's not male or female. Jesus told us that God is spirit.

God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. John 4:24

The *truth* means that you worship who God really is and not who you want God to be.

Since God is spirit, he is neither male nor female. In fact, to limit God to either gender would be to make him less than God. But God can't be limited. God lacks nothing. So he possesses all the qualities of both men and women.

In one sense, I think we intuitively understand that God is not male. But there is a big part of us that naturally pictures God as male, don't we? I remember thinking about this back in seminary. I was doing research on whether or not women should be in leadership in the church and in my reading I came across the discussion of whether or not God was male and I realized that I had never thought about it before. But if I was honest at the time, I probably would have said that God was at least more male than female.

I mean, the Bible talks about God as Father, so it's only natural to associate maleness to God, right? Plus the Bible attributes many male characteristics to God like strength and power and the ability to be our protector provider. Women also have these attributes but the Bible often frames them in masculine ways, like a warrior, etc.

The truth is a lot of people think that God is male...even some our most respected theologians from the past. I think it's important for you to get a little church history so you understand how our view of God developed.

Thomas Aquinas (Catholic) said that women couldn't reflect the nature of God because they were defective by nature.⁶ Martin Luther (Lutheran) took a little more moderate view.⁷ He said that men and women both reflect God but men more so, similar to the sun and moon.

But the minute you see God as male or, as Luther said, more male than female, how does that impact our view of women? (Note the progression here.) Aquinas made the logical step of reason.⁸ He said that men *needed* to dominate women because women can't reason well. John Knox (Presbyterian) concluded that women should submit to the rule of men because their nature was stupid, weak, unstable, and cruel.⁹ And John Calvin (Presbyterian, Reformed) similarly saw women as "born to obey men".¹⁰

You see, if God IS male then the natural conclusion is that men are more like God. And that makes men better than women. God's maleness validates men (proves they are important) and invalidates women. And you know what happens then. Women aren't treated with the same respect or dignity that men are. And women are more likely to be held in contempt and suspicion.

And men can justify it all with the Bible. You don't have to look too far to see that do you? History is full of women being discriminated against. And we even see it in churches and in the homes of people who say they love God.

Listen to what happens when people believe that God is male...

Somewhere in America a woman is battered, usually by her intimate partner, every 15 seconds. (UN Study On The Status of Women, Year 2000)

Of the 600,000-800,000 people trafficked across international borders each year, 70 percent are female The majority of these victims are forced into the commercial sex trade. (U.S. Department of State. 2004. Trafficking in Persons Report. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State.)

17.6 % of women in the United States have survived a completed or attempted rape. (Full Report of the Prevalence, Incidence, and Consequences of Violence Against Women, Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey, November, 2000)

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether in Women and Redemption. (Mpls: Fortress, 1998) p. 95.

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether in Women and Redemption. (Mpls: Fortress, 1998) p. 118, 120

⁸ Paul K. Jewett in Man as Male and Female, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) p. 63

⁹ John Knox, The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women (1558), in The Political Writings of John Knox: The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women and Other Selected Works, ed. Marvin A Breslow (Washington: Folger Books, The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1985), p. 42-43.

¹⁰ Jewett, page 131.

In the United States, women are paid only 78¢ on average for every dollar paid to men. (National Women's Law Center)

At least 60 million girls who would otherwise be expected to be alive are "missing" from various populations, mostly in Asia, as a result of sex-selective abortions, infanticide or neglect. (UN Study On The Status of Women, Year 2000)

Maybe some of you heard that Sweden just confirmed that sex selection abortions are not illegal in their country and this magazine cover says that it's happening in Canada too.

There's a word for what I'm talking about; misogyny...the hatred of women. I know that sounds strong but I don't know what else you call it when you treat another human being with so much disdain. But I think it starts with our view of God. If God is male, then men win...*every time*.

So my point is...be careful with your view of God. It will impact how you treat people; At home, at work, at church. It will even impact things like using pornography.

You see, I think one reason men allow themselves to view pornography is because they don't believe that women reflect the image of God. It's okay to use women in degrading ways because they aren't as valuable as men in the first place. They may not think about it that way. But I think it's true. And if they were honest they would admit that they would never treat any other person of value in such a degrading way. So why are women the exception?

But our job, as Kingdom people, people sent to earth to reveal heaven on earth, is to show dignity and respect to every person, no matter who they are. Our job is to communicate God's value to all of his creation.

You might say, but if God's not male, then why does the bible refer to God as Father? Doesn't that prove that God is male? No, and I'll tell you why...When the Bible refers to God as Father it is merely accommodating us. I talked about this in my first sermon in this series. The Bible refers to God in a lot of ways that aren't necessarily accurate but still help us. So, when we call God a "rock" that doesn't mean he's made of stone. It simply communicates that God is trustworthy. And in the same way, when we call God *father*, it doesn't mean he's a man. It simply communicates that God's personal. It speaks of relationship. And if God is personal you don't want to refer to him as an "it" or a "force" or a "thing". So you have to use some kind of a personal noun or pronoun. The default through the years has always been the masculine. For example, we often refer to a room full of people as "guys" even though there are men and women. We'd never refer to the people as "gals". That's a cultural norm and women are used to being included in masculine nouns.

But, the Bible helps us out here. In the very beginning of the Bible it says...

Then God said, "Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves... So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them. Genesis 1:26,27

So this tells us that men and women are both – together - the reflection of God. It doesn't say that one is more like God than the other. Well, I hope that helps with the first question.

The second question is *Are the Father, Jesus and the Spirit all God?* After Mackenzie Phillips had his initial encounter with Papa, Jesus and Sarayu, The Shack says...

Since there were three of them, maybe this was a trinity sort of thing. But two women and a man and one of them white? Then again, why had he naturally assumed that God would be white? He knew his mind was rambling, so he focused on the one question he most wanted answered. "Then," Mack struggled to ask, "which one of you is God?" "I am," said all three in unison. Mack looked from one to the next, and even though he couldn't begin to grasp what he was seeing and hearing, he somehow believed them. The Shack, page 87

Whenever we talk about the Father, Son and Spirit we are talking about what people call the Trinity or the Godhead. The word Trinity is never used in the Bible but let me show you some verses that support the idea of a Trinity. First, Peter opens one of his letters by saying...

God the Father chose you long ago, and the Spirit has made you holy. As a result, you have obeyed Jesus Christ and are cleansed by his blood. 1 Peter 1:2

At Jesus' baptism Luke tells us...

As he was praying, the heavens opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you. Luke 3:21,22

When the apostle Paul was talking about spiritual gifts he said...

Now there are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but it is the same Holy Spirit who is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service in the church, but it is the same Lord (Jesus) we are serving. There are different ways God works in our lives, but it is the same God who does the work through all of us. 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

And Paul closes out a letter by saying...

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2 Corinthians 13:13

The writers didn't define the Trinity. They took it for granted. To them it was so obvious they never felt the need to describe it. But from what they write we can tell that the Father, Son and Spirit are all considered God.

But, you know, from what I can tell, the Trinity of God thoroughly confuses people. They aren't always sure what to do with each Person of the Trinity. I mean, if we pray to Jesus are we offending the Father and the Spirit? Do they get jealous of each other? Does one feel left out if we don't give them enough attention?

Then, like it says in the book, there's this Good Cop/Bad Cop thing going on where some people see the Father as the bad guy, the stern angry judge where Jesus is the "big brother" that they can turn to for help and protect them from their angry Father. And the Spirit...well, most people don't know what to do with the Spirit.

I think the Trinity is an issue that *The Shack* does a good job of addressing. It helps make the Trinity a reality...showing us how the Father, Son and Spirit are fully God and interact with us in a distinct way.

Probably the most important lesson *The Shack* teaches us about God is that God, by definition, IS relationship. Relationship exists within himself between the Father, Son and Spirit. God is defined by relationship.

When I saw this, a number of years ago, it totally changed my view of not only God but of myself. It dawned on me that God created me to be relational. It wasn't OK for me to isolate and be an introvert.

So, if God IS relationship, and we are created in the image of God, then suddenly relationship isn't something we avoid, it's something that we want to move toward. Relationship is something that we need to have restored to our lives to make us whole. But in order to do that we need to see each other as equal, just like the Trinity; equal but distinct.

As God followers being in relationship with each other isn't optional. It's required. We are people that are called to pursue relationship rather than isolation and independence. We are people who shouldn't tolerate anything that separates or damages our relationships like resentment or gossip or envy or unfaithfulness or unkind words. And when our relationships breakdown, rather than walking away, we ought to work at understanding and forgiveness and reconciliation and building unity and anything else that will restore our relationships.

Why do we work so hard at this? Because it's our calling as God's people. We have been created in his image and since his image is that of relationship we need to value relationships as well.

Then there is divorce. Divorce is only used as the very last option when all other efforts have failed and the other person refuses to remain engaged in the relationship.

Do you see why your view of God is so important? Your image of God determines the person you become. It determines how you will treat others. So I hope you will give it some serious thought.

So, is God male? No. Are the Father, Son and Spirit all God? Absolutely. Now the last question is this: Is there a chain of command in the Trinity? I've given you enough to chew on. So I'll talk about that in my next message.

Prayer: Father, help us to understand how a low view of you takes us low. But a high view of you helps us to not only value ourselves but value each other. It helps us to value our relationships rather than let them fall apart. Help us to model your kingdom here on earth in our relationships. And forgive us for the times that we have treated people like they are anything less than made in your image.

Going Deeper

Use the following questions for personal reflection or to discuss with your family, friends or small group.

1. What is your picture of God? How do you imagine him in your mind?
2. In your mind, is God male? if so, why is that?
3. How do you think your view of God impacts how you live your life? How does it impact how you treat other people?
4. Do you think it's ever permissible to refer to God as "Mother"? (Note: this question doesn't necessarily have a right answer. So don't fight about it! Talk about it to explore the idea and help you understand your view, and others view, of God.)
5. As you relate to God, do you distinguish between the Father, Son and Spirit? If so, how? (for example, do you ever pray to different Persons in the Godhead?) If not, why not?
6. Do you see any Person of the Trinity as more approachable than the others? Why is that?
7. Do you believe there is a chain of command in the Trinity (that is, the Spirit reports to Jesus and Jesus reports to the Father) or do you believe that the Father, Son and Spirit are equal and relate to each other in mutual submission? (Theologians disagree over this, so again, discuss the idea...not trying to be right...but exploring the idea).
8. If a person believes that the Trinity operates with a chain of command, how do you think that will impact their relationships? In contrast, how would it impact their relationships if they believe that there is no chain of command in the Godhead?

Finding God in The Shack

Part Six: *Questioning the Character of God* (2)

By Remy Diederich

Cedarbrook Church 2009

Over the last several weeks I've been looking at the book *The Shack* because it asks great questions about God, questions that a lot of people seem to be interested in. So I thought it would be good to see what the Bible has to say about all the questions it raises.

A couple weeks ago I answered the question; *Is God male?* That might seem kind of odd but a lot of people thanked me for that message and told me it helped them understand a lot of things about God as well as why women are often treated so poorly.

So today I want to answer another odd question and that is; *Is there a chain of command between the Father, Jesus and the Spirit?* That is, does the Father call the shots in the Trinity? Does he tell Jesus and the Spirit what to do? Or is there another kind of relationship between the three?

Again, you might not think it's important. But how you answer that question says a lot about how you relate to other people at home, at work, at church and in all your relationships. You see, we always live out our image of God. Did you know that? Whatever your image of God is, it will directly impact how you live your life. And so, whether you realize it or not, what you think about God matters.

Now, in regard to my question today, some people think there is a chain of command in the Trinity – that Jesus and the Spirit answer to the Father.¹¹ Other people, like the author of *The Shack*, don't believe in a chain of command. They don't believe that there is a hierarchy in the Trinity and that they all defer to each other.

Let me read a little from *The Shack* to give you a feel for what I'm talking about. Mack, the main character of the book, has just met the Father, Son and Spirit and he's trying to figure out their relationship. So he says...

I know you are all one and all, and that there are three of you. But you respond with such graciousness to each other. Isn't one of you more the boss than the other two?...I'm talking about who's in charge. Don't you have a chain of command? The Shack, page 121

Chain of command? That sounds ghastly! Jesus said. "At least binding" Papa added as they both started laughing...Mackenzie, we have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command. ..Hierarchy would make no sense among us. The Shack, page 121

¹¹ I had to cut out a significant portion of my sermon due to time and complexity. Go to the end of the sermon text to see why people believe in a chain of command and why I disagree with that theory.

If you think about it, it *doesn't* make much sense that the Father would have to give orders to Jesus or the Spirit. If the Father, Son and Spirit are all God then they should all be thinking the same thing and have the same agenda. Since the Father, Son and Spirit are the perfect example of unity, there's no need for a chain of command to "keep order".

So, we have two totally different views of God in the church. One view sees the Trinity functioning with a chain of command, just like in the army, with the Father handing out orders. The other view sees the Father, Son and Spirit all working together in unity, each deferring to the other.

What does this have to do with your life today? A lot! Just give me a few minutes to unpack this and I think you'll see how relevant this is.

Today I want to look at a short teaching that Jesus gave to his disciples on leadership. I think that by listening to his view on leadership and how we should relate to each other that we'll get a good idea how the Father, Son and Spirit all relate to each other. Let's take a look at the book of Matthew 20.

Now, in this passage Jesus has just laid down a kingdom principle that the last shall be first and the first shall be last. Even if you've never read the Bible you've heard that before, right? We quote that all the time, usually as a joke, like when someone cuts in front of us in line we say... *The Bible says the first shall be last ya know!* hoping to shame them into going to the back of the line.

But Jesus wasn't joking. He unveiled a foundational truth about the way God works and it was radically different from the way the world works.

Then Matthew continues with another story to add to this idea of the last being first...

Now as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified." Matthew 20:16-19

So, Jesus lays out what's going to happen to him. Very serious stuff. But listen to what happens next...

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons (that is, James and John) came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." Matthew 20:20,21

Can you believe it? Jesus is talking about how he's about to be betrayed and crucified and this mother seizes the moment to ask Jesus if her sons can have positions of power in his coming kingdom. And my guess is that James and John put her up to it. I say that because in the text it says that the disciples got mad at James and John (not the mom) for her saying this.

Now, there's a backstory here and that is that James and John were Jesus' cousins. That means that their mom was Jesus' aunt. So I'm thinking that James and John pushed their mom to do this because they thought she'd have more sway with Jesus because she was the sister of Jesus' mom.

Because of their family connections, these guys probably thought they had a great shot at being the chief of staff and the press secretary for Jesus, right? They could see themselves riding around in limos and being quoted on CNN. They'd have the power. They would be telling people what to do and living in luxury when Jesus took control.

Isn't that what a lot of us want? To have the power? To be in control? To be the person making the decisions and not the one being told what to do? C'mon! Admit it! That's what James and John wanted. But Jesus sets them straight. He tells them that they have a distorted view of leadership. Listen to what he says...

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them.

They didn't know what they were asking? Was he crazy. Of course they did. They knew exactly what they were asking. They wanted to be on top of the heap along with Jesus and calling the shots when Jesus set up his kingdom. But Jesus challenges them by asking...

"Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

What's the cup that Jesus is referring to? The cup of suffering that he was just talking about before. So they say...

"We can," they answered. Matthew 20:22

They are saying. *Oh yeah. No problem. Bring it on!* They are clearly clueless. They have no idea what Jesus is about to endure. And they have no idea what it means to be a leader in God's kingdom. So Jesus has to spell it out for them...

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Matthew 20:25

Now this is interesting because he's talking about how the Romans rule. They rule with a chain of command. And since we are wondering if the Trinity operates with a chain of command, what Jesus says here will give us some insight into the answer we are looking for. Jesus says their rulers "lord it over them" which means that they rule with force and power. They use their authority to get their way at the expense of the people.

Now listen to Jesus' commentary...

It is not so with you. Matthew 20:26

It is not so with you.

That's very emphatic. Jesus doesn't want them to have anything to do with this kind of leadership, at least in the church. (Remember he's talking to the disciples so be careful not to apply this teaching much beyond the church and the family). This is huge. Everyone needs to hear this. Leadership in God's kingdom is not about telling other people what to do. It's not about being the top dog in a chain of command. It's not about imposing your will on others for your benefit. That's the way the Romans ruled their people. But Jesus said: *It is not so with you.*

James and John are thinking: *Bummer!* That's not what they wanted to hear. I bet they had never heard that before. They just assumed that leadership WAS lording it over people and exercising power. They were looking forward to it and maybe getting a little payback.

I would have loved to have been there right at that moment to see the look on their faces. What a picture of disappointment and confusion. Jesus just let the air out of their balloons and the reality of what he was saying started to sink in. That's why Jesus asked, *can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*

He was saying, *Okay, you want to lead with me. But are you willing to suffer with me?* Because that's what kingdom leadership does; kingdom leadership is willing to suffer to help others. It doesn't cause *people* to suffer. It suffers *for* people.

That kind of takes the glory out of leadership, doesn't it? It kind of makes you think twice about pushing your way to the front of the line so you can be in charge. But just to be clear Jesus explained what he meant...

Instead (of lording it over people), whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

Jesus is looking at these young bucks – full of pride and independence and passion and vision – and he says, *“If you want to be a leader you have to serve each other first.”* You know, I bet these guys would have been happy to serve the poor or serve widows or just about anybody imaginable but asking them to serve *each other*...that must have been a bitter pill to swallow. They were in *competition* with each other. They didn't want to *serve* each other. I bet Jesus was smiling knowing how hard this was for them and he was eager to see how they'd respond.

And Jesus didn't offer any wiggle room. He said *whoever wants to become great MUST be a servant...*, in other words, serving people is not an option because leadership is not about gaining power. It's not about people serving you. Leadership is about laying aside your power in order to serve others. If you want to be first you need to be willing to be last.

Now, a lot of us nod at this. You might say, I've heard that before. That's nothing new. But my question is: *do you really believe it? Is that how you live your life? In your most important relationships are you serving people or are you hoping to get them to serve you?*

- If you are married are you trying to get your spouse to carry your weight so you can play more or do you work to try and take more off their plate?
- At home or work are you more concerned about people submitting to your authority than you are interested in finding out how you can meet their needs and help them be successful?
- If you are a child or a teenager do you take for granted your parent's kindness or do you find ways to return their favors?

- In your friendships are you always asking your friends to do what you want or to help you out or do you seek to do what they want?
- If you are a manager do you use your people to make you look good or do you look for ways to make them look good?

You see, we are billboards for God's kingdom in everything we do...especially in how we treat people. What do people see in your relationships? Do they see a self serving commander in chief taking advantage of people...bossing them around to get your way? Or do they see someone who is laying aside their rights and privileges in order to benefit others?

Let me make a comparison between the two kinds of leaders Jesus is talking about here.

Chain of Command Leader:

Skills needed: making decisions, giving direction, checking up, reward or punishment

Required of others: obedience

Upside: compliance, order, success

Downside: possible anger, loss of dignity, fear, disunity, shallow relationship

Now, remember, I'm not saying that the chain of command is never needed. For example, in the military it is very important. But it's not a scenario that builds relationship. It often fosters contempt.

Kingdom (Servant) Leader:

Skills needed: listening, humility, compassion, respect, patience, wisdom, understanding, teaching

Required of others: honesty, patience, humility, listening, willingness

Upside: unity, love, success, communication, intimacy, dignity, self-worth, honor

Downside: being ignored or taken advantage of, failure

This scenario requires all the skills of the chain of command and much more because it requires the ability to communicate well to learn about the person you are leading. That's why it also requires humility because you have to be willing to lower yourself to care about their needs and not just the result you want to achieve. The upside is huge but it is not without risk. People might ignore you or take advantage of your service to them (isn't that what happened to Jesus?).

Now, think about Jesus. Which type of leader best describes him? He never forced compliance on anyone, did he? He never insisted that people obey him because he was large and in charge. He served. Some followed and some ignored him or even took advantage of him.

Think about your relationships. Which best describes you? What do you need to do to better reflect the servant leadership of Jesus?

Let's get back to Matthew because Jesus isn't done yet describing a kingdom leader. He talked about serving but now he gives a practical example of what that means...

...whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:27, 28

Serving to Jesus included giving up your life for those under your care. That must have given his disciples some pause.

I saw a tattoo the other day that said, *"Live for everything, die for nothing"* and I thought, that's not the motto of a servant. That's the motto of a very selfish person. They want to get everything out of life without any sacrifice. That was the motto of James and John...*live for everything, die for nothing*. That's why when Jesus was arrested they ran away. They weren't even willing to die for Jesus let alone each other.

But Jesus lived for every-THING and died for every-ONE. He is the ultimate leader. His leadership wasn't anything like the world around him. Even though Jesus was God, he placed himself beneath everyone and became a servant. And because of that, God placed him first. That's why the Bible says about Jesus that...

In his very nature he was God. But he did not think that being equal with God was something he should hold on to. Instead, he emptied himself of his deity and made himself nothing. He took on the very nature of a servant. He was made in human form. He appeared as a man. He came down to the lowest level. He obeyed God completely, even though it led to his death. In fact, he died on a cross. So God lifted him up to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. Philippians 2:6-9

The last became first. You see, when leaders SERVE their people it's not hard to follow them, is it? Why is that? Because when they put themselves at risk...when you can see that they are laying everything on the line to benefit others and not themselves, you know you can trust them. You know they aren't using you for their own agenda.

But when leaders hide at the top of a chain of command and demand others to serve them it doesn't breed trust. It usually breeds fear and resentment and suspicion. And people are filled with questions like; *Do they care about ME? Or is this all about them? Are they out to help ME or are they out to use me for their agenda?*

A lot of us don't trust leaders because we have been taken advantage of by them – people that were supposed to be fighting for us – a husband, a parent, a teacher, a boss, a priest or pastor. But when the truth was told they turned out to only care about what was in it for them. And you got burned. And now many of you don't trust leaders. I know...I can tell when I interact with you. I have to work twice as hard to prove myself to you because other leaders have failed you (that's not a complaint, just an observation).

But Jesus models something different for us. Instead of a top down chain of command leadership Jesus models a bottom up serving of others. And when that happens the chain of command falls away. You don't need a chain of command to keep everyone in line.

So you see, how you view God impacts how you live – especially how you treat those closest to you. For their sake and for the sake of the kingdom, I hope you'll offer yourself as a servant.

Prayer: *Father, I am amazed at your kingdom. None of us would ever have thought that the last should be first and the first should be last. We quote this all the time but we rarely live it. Forgive us and forgive us for the pain that unwillingness has brought to our relationships. Spirit, fill us with your humility to serve that we might represent your kingdom well. Amen.*

The following is a segment that I eliminated from my preached sermon due to time and complexity.

The reason people believe that Jesus reports to the Father is because of the many verses that reflect this idea...

We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 1 John 4:14

But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name... John 14:26

For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. John 12:49

Jesus said... *“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Matthew 26:39*

Now I want you to realize that...the head of Christ is God. 1 Corinthians 11:3

These verses seem to clearly reflect a hierarchy in the Godhead. But let me suggest why this might not be what it looks to be.

1. **Jesus’ submission was unique to his role on earth as a human.** In other words, Jesus submitted to the Father when he came to earth and lived his life as a man. But that’s not the role he lives out now in heaven. In the book of Philippians, chapter 2, it tells us that Jesus “emptied himself and took on the role of a servant.” He laid down most of his powers and rights as God and lived the life of a human. So, all the verses that speak of Jesus doing what the Father told him do only reflect the relationship that he had as a result of becoming a man. In John 17:5 it tells us that Jesus had a different glory before the world began. That’s the glory that he laid aside to take on humanity.
2. **Jesus’ submission showed unity of purpose vs. independence in the Trinity.** Another reason that the Bible authors spoke in terms of the Father directing was to be careful to show that the Father, Jesus and the Spirit were all working *together* for one purpose.

They wanted to be careful not to communicate that there were three gods with three separate agenda's. They were all one and working together in relationship.

3. **Jesus' submission was voluntary humility not forced obedience.** When it says that the Father "sent" the Son or "sent" the Spirit it's easy to assume that the sender has all the authority...that they are the boss. But be careful not to read that into it. We assume the sender is greater but that's a human perspective. When people went to New Orleans and told people down there that their church sent them, they weren't saying that we told them to go. The truth is, they decided to go on their own but we affirmed their decision. But they also go as our agents. They voluntarily presented themselves as servants from Cedarbrook and to New Orleans. Do you see that? A chain of command person would tend to see it as a boss ordering someone to go serve. But in reality, it's not like that. And that's how I read the relationship between the Father, Jesus and the Spirit. It's not a chain of command but rather a relationship of mutual submission. No one's calling the shots. Everyone is working together for a common purpose.

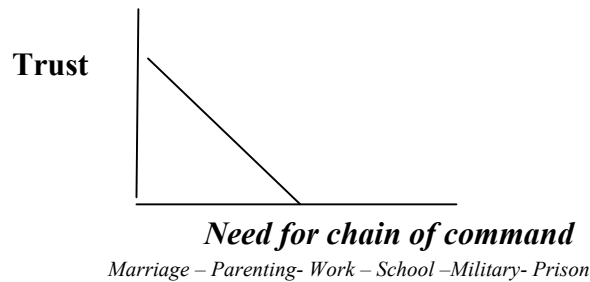
So, instead of a chain of command between the Father, Son and Spirit, we are talking about everyone being mutually submissive to one another, not because they have to but because they want to. What looks like a chain of command is really humility as each one takes on the form of a servant.

This is the picture that The Shack paints of the Godhead, all bending over backward to serve the other. Not every relationship can function this way. I'll talk about that later. But imagine what marriages would look like if couples quit worrying about who was in charge and they all spent their time thinking about how they could serve each other. Imagine what churches or our work place would look like if people weren't so interested in position and power to validate themselves and just worked for the good of the organization.

I think one of the reasons we struggle with seeing what the Bible says is because we just haven't seen it lived out very often. So we tend to just do what we know, no matter what the Bible says. We end up projecting our thoughts onto the Bible rather than letting the Bible project its thoughts on us. And as a result we have Christians and churches that look more like the world than Jesus.

The chain of command scenario tends to deny people their ability and right to think and offer input. It really robs people of their dignity, that is, their sense of identity and personal worth. If all you are is a manifestation of someone else's will, where are you? Who are you? We see this a lot in women who have been dominated by their husband or children dominated by their parents. They have no sense of self and so when they get out from under control of their husband or parent they are lost. They don't know who they are.

Now, there are always the practical types out there thinking about the exceptions. But remember, Jesus was talking to his disciples. He wasn't talking to police or prison guards or the military. He was talking to potential leaders in the church. It was their job to model the kingdom of God in their relationships. And the same can be said of the Christian family. Our families should reflect the kingdom of God.



Let's look at a graph here. The more trust in a relationship the less you need a chain of command so when you graph that out it's an inverse relationship. In small groups of high trust you should be able to get along without someone calling the shots. You should be able to talk and reach a decision together. But the bigger the group or the greater the need for quick decisions (military/police) or with less trust you need stronger lines of authority.

In families with children sometimes you are able to discuss decisions but other times it's not appropriate to discuss an issue. The same is true with large groups of people. Sometimes on big issues, like building a church, you need lots of input but other times there is no discussion, like which songs we will sing this Sunday. And then there are situations like the military. When you go into battle it's not open to group discussion. Or dealing in a situation where there is little or no trust, say, with police or in prison, the chain of command is very high and the Bible even says that you may need to use force.

He serves God and will do you good. But if you do wrong, watch out! The ruler doesn't carry a sword for no reason at all. He serves God. And God is carrying out his anger through him. The ruler punishes anyone who does wrong. Romans 13:4

Going Deeper

Use the following questions for personal reflection or to discuss with your family, friends or small group.

1. When you think of the Father, Son and Spirit do you think of them interacting in a chain of command (the Father telling Jesus and the Spirit what to do) or in a relationship of mutual submission? Why is that?
2. What comes to mind when you hear the word "submission". Why is that?
3. Read through Matthew 20:20-27. Can you relate to James and John wanting to have the power of sitting at Jesus' side (the top of the chain)? Talk about the seduction of power and control in this world.

4. Jesus said that Gentile leaders “lord it over” their people. How have you seen leaders at work, church and home “lord it over” others?
5. What was Jesus’ commentary on that kind of leadership? What is the alternative he insisted on?
6. Read Matthew 20:1-19. How does this parable relate to the verses in 20-27?
7. A servant or submissive leader sounds contradictory. How can someone lead and serve at the same time?
8. What can you do in your relationships at work, home, and church that reflect the servant leadership Jesus spoke about?

Finding God in the Shack

Part Seven: *Forgiveness*

By Remy Diederich

Cedarbrook Church, 6/14/09

Today is the last day of my series; *Finding God in The Shack*. *The Shack* is a current New York Times best seller that raises a lot of great questions about God. And we’ve been looking what the Bible has to say about those questions. Today we are looking at forgiveness and answering the question; *How can I forgive when it hurts so much?* In *The Shack*, the issue of forgiveness is never far from the surface.

If you don’t know the story it starts out by introducing us to Mack, the main character. We quickly learn on page one that Mack was beaten as a teenager by his father while his father quoted Bible verses to him. So there are definitely some forgiveness issues with his father. Then the main event in the story is the brutal murder of his youngest daughter. Not only are there issues of forgiveness related to the murderer but we learn later on that Mack feels the need to be forgiven by his daughter. He’s convinced that if he had only paid better attention to his daughter her life could have been saved.

And then, finally, there is the issue of forgiving God for allowing both his childhood abuse and his daughter’s death. I talked about this back in the message on *The Great Sadness*. So you could say that Mack’s life is a story about forgiveness.

But that could be said for a lot of us. I don’t think you can make it through life without being deeply offended by someone. And our life course is determined by whether we choose to forgive or not. So, all of our lives are defined by forgiveness to some degree. We just aren’t aware of it.

I want to show you a short video about a woman who struggles with forgiveness.

Video: Joleen's family had a business. As a married adult she learned that her dad had affairs in his business travels. When her husband confronted her dad, he dad fired him. When she in turn confronted him about not only the affairs but firing her husband, her dad fired her too. Then Joleen wrote her dad a nasty letter saying that she hoped he died in debt and hasn't spoken to him since. She said that she probably needs to forgive him but she can't see how it's going to restore the relationship. The video ends without any solution.

Joleen was kind of stuck, wasn't she? She didn't know what to do. She imagined a day when she'd be reconciled to her dad but she didn't know how to get there. Let me ask you; do you know how to get there? Do you know how to reconcile your broken relationships?

Now, you should know that there's nothing wrong with getting angry with someone. Anger is a God-given emotion that happens when you lose something valuable. So Joleen had a right to be angry. She lost trust in her dad because of the affair. And then she lost her job and along with that her income. Plus she lost her relationship with her dad. So, she had every right to be angry. She had a lot of losses.

But where we often go wrong with our anger is we make bad *choices* in our anger. And that just makes things worse. That's what Joleen did. She said some vicious things to her dad that she regretted. And then what did he do in his anger? He fired both Joleen and her husband. And then she, in turn, wrote the letter and stopped talking to him. That's why anger gets such a bad name. It's not that anger is wrong. It's that we let it affect our decision making.

We also go wrong with anger by not letting go of it. You see, there's a natural cycle for dealing with anger. We feel it. We express it and then we let it go. We feel it. We express it (by that I mean we use our anger to solve a problem) and then we let it go. But some of us feel it and express it and then feel it and express it over and over and over. We get stuck in a rut and it slowly eats away at us. And if you aren't careful it can over take your life. It can impact you emotionally, causing depression and anxiety. It can impact you spiritually, putting a wall between you and God. And it can impact you physically.

I jumped on the Mayo Clinic's website the other day and it says that,

Evidence is mounting that holding on to grudges and bitterness results in long-term health problems.

And then it lists the following problems that come from a failure to forgive.

- Increased blood pressure
- Increased Stress
- Increased heart rate
- Increased risk of alcohol or substance abuse
- Increased depression symptoms
- Increased anxiety symptoms
- Increased chronic pain
- Increased risk of heart disease

www.mayoclinic.com/health

So, unresolved anger affects you emotionally, spiritually and physically. I wonder if you any of this sounds familiar to you this morning.

When I was on the Mayo site they also had some indicators of unforgiveness that I turned into a twelve question inventory. Count how many times you answer “yes” to these questions...

1. *When I'm offended, I tend to dwell on the events that surrounded that offense.*
2. *I often hear from others that I have a chip on my shoulder or that I'm wallowing in self-pity.*
3. *My family and friends avoid me because they don't enjoy being around me.*
4. *I have angry outbursts at the smallest perceived slights.*
5. *I often feel misunderstood.*
6. *I drink excessively, smoke or use drugs to try to cope with my pain.*
7. *I show symptoms of depression or anxiety.*
8. *I am often consumed by a desire for revenge or punishment toward my offenders.*
9. *I automatically think the worst about people or situations.*
10. *I regret the loss of a valued relationship.*
11. *My life lacks meaning or purpose.*
12. *I have lost my connection to God.*

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions you might have a problem with anger and forgiveness. And if you answered “yes” to a few of them, you definitely do. If that’s true then you are in the right place today because I want to help point you in the right direction.

You know, with all the problems caused by unresolved anger it’s not surprising that forgiveness was so central to Jesus’ teaching. I mean, in the one prayer that Jesus taught us to pray, forgiveness had a central role, didn’t it? Jesus taught us to pray...

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Matthew 6:12

Has that sentence ever bothered you? I would feel much better if Jesus had said,

Help us to forgive others as you have forgiven us.

But Jesus didn’t say that. He said, “forgive us as, or in the same way that, we forgive others.” See the difference?

Okay, time for a little honesty here. How many of you want God to forgive you the same way you forgive others? Not me! My forgiveness is often conditional and based on how I feel at the moment. But I think Jesus taught us to pray that way because that’s his goal for us. He wants us to forgive others as if our own forgiveness depended on it. Wouldn’t you be quicker to forgive if you knew that your forgiveness depended on it? Sure you would. Jesus is saying, *forgive like your life depended on it.*

But forgiveness is so foreign, isn’t it? It feels so contrary to what we often want done. What we *want* is justice. What we *want* is a little payback. I think we can all relate to the story in the Bible where Peter comes to Jesus and asks Jesus,

How many times do I have to forgive? Up to seven times? Matthew 18:21

It's like he's keeping count and Peter's hoping that after forgiving seven times he gets permission to punch somebody. But what does Jesus say? 70x7, which is the Jewish way of saying "infinity". There is no end to forgiveness. There never comes the time when you are justified to give up and punch the guy. I'm sorry. You need to learn to let it go.

You see forgiveness is a defining characteristic of Jesus followers. Forgiveness is something we should be known for. We should be so experienced at forgiving that people are coming to us for lessons. We should be forgiveness experts. Let me give you some reasons why forgiveness is so central to our faith.

First, forgiveness honors relationship.

God is a relational God. He created us to live in relationship and community, making community almost impossible. But as sinners we are constantly offending each other. So we need forgiveness to help us live together. It's a relational tool that everyone needs in their toolbox.

Too often we treat relationships like children treat toys; when they break we throw them away. But God doesn't want us to throw them away. He wants us to repair them and the first step is forgiveness. When we forgive we show God that we value what he values. Forgiveness is hard but we are willing to do it because we value our relationships just like God does.

Second, forgiveness reveals God's forgiveness.

God's forgiveness is a hard concept to understand. But every time you forgive you show people the love of God. Your forgiveness makes God's forgiveness tangible. Accessible. Paul told the Corinthians...

We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. 2 Corinthians 5:20

So our forgiveness reveals God's forgiveness.

Third, forgiveness frees you from the burden of justice, that is, the burden of payback.

I don't know if you've ever thought about it but holding a grudge is a lot of work. Just think how much mental energy you put into rehashing the events of your offense over and over again. Think about how much time you spend having imaginary discussions proving your offender wrong and humiliating them. Think about the time you spend telling others how you were betrayed.

But God tells us that we don't have to waste our time with that. Justice is his job. He'll take care of it. Our job is to simply turn our offenses over to him to handle. It's just like going to a lawyer. Once you give a lawyer your case it's not yours to fight anymore, right? It's not yours to research or to stress about. It's their job. That's why you pay them the big bucks, because the job is too much for you. It's beyond your ability.

Well, that's what you need to do with God. Let him be your lawyer. Tell him your complaint and then let him take it from there. I like what one author once said about forgiveness...

To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you. Lewis smedes.
You thought you were holding the other person prisoner with your anger but you realize the prisoner was you!

Fourth, we forgive because we've been given both the power and the ministry to forgive. You see every person that has given their life to Jesus has the Spirit of God living in them. You have the Spirit of forgiveness inside of you. You have what it takes to forgive. You can do it. You've got the power. You may not have the will or the desire but you *do* have the power.

Plus, you've been called to forgive. Like I said, it's central to what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus said...

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. ...Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. "Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven". Luke 6:35-37

So the question really isn't "Can you forgive?", it's "Will you forgive?" Will you let the Spirit of God forgive through you or will you shut out the Spirit and seek revenge?

The surprising thing is that in spite of all the reasons why forgiveness is the right thing to do so many of us refuse to forgive. In fact, over the years I've asked people why they don't forgive and these are some of the answers I've gotten.

*It hurts too much to forgive.
Anger works. It gives me the control and power I want.
They never said they were sorry.
I want them to suffer a bit.
I don't want to dig up the past.
It's not my issue it's theirs.
I don't want to let them off the hook.
I tried forgiving and it didn't work.
It's unforgiveable.*

I think this last one is what Mack believed in *The Shack*. He felt that murdering a child is unforgiveable and so he didn't have to even consider Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. He didn't think it applied to him. Listen to how Mack objected when he understood that God wanted him to forgive his daughter's murderer.

Papa, how can I ever forgive that son of a bitch who killed my Missy. If he were here today, I don't know what I would do. I know it isn't right, but I want him to hurt like he hurt me...if I can't get justice, I still want revenge. The Shack, page 224

Papa simply let the torrent rush out of Mack, waiting for the wave to pass. "Mack, for you to forgive this man is for you to release him to me and allow me to redeem him". "Redeem him?" Again Mack felt the fire of anger and hurt. "I don't want you to redeem him! I want you to hurt him, to punish him, to put him in hell." The Shack, page 224

This opens up a long dialogue where Papa teaches Mack what forgiveness is and what it isn't. I've always used the definition for forgiveness that says,
Forgiveness means giving up the right to get even.

But Papa had a more graphic definition. She said,
Forgiveness is ... letting go of another person's throat. Page 224

In other words, forgiveness is refusing to offer payback - refusing to get revenge. It's refusing to "teach them a lesson" or to *make them pay*. Forgiveness simply says...*I'm going to move on with my life and let God deal with you. I'm giving up the right to get even.*

Then Papa goes on to define what forgiveness is not.

First, she says that ***forgiveness is not forgetting***. A lot of people justify their anger by saying "I can't forget so I how can I forgive?" And they are right about not being able to forget. How can you forget being beaten or raped or betrayed or rejected or humiliated? You can't. The truth is that *you forgive when you can't forget*. It's the small things you forget. The big things you can't forget. So it's the big things that need to be forgiven. And the greater the offense the more important it is that you forgive. It's just the opposite of what everyone tends to think. People think that the big things are unforgiveable. No. That's backwards. You've *got* to forgive the big things if you have any hope of having a good life. Forgiveness is the only hope of separating yourself from the past. Without forgiveness your past will traumatize you over and over as you relive the event. You'll carry your pain to the grave without forgiveness.

But forgiveness sets you free from that pain. Forgiveness allows you to move on with your life. It's the gift you give yourself to overcome your past.

Next, Papa said that ***forgiveness is not excusing***. Many people have told me that they can't forgive because they don't want to excuse their offender or let them think that what they did was no big deal. But people only say that because they misunderstand forgiveness. They think that forgiveness is for small offenses and revenge is for big offenses. So if they forgive they think they are calling their offense small and letting their offender off the hook.

But like I just said, it's just the opposite. Forgiveness is for the big things. We forget the little things. So to tell someone that you forgive them actually communicates that they did something very offensive to you...*so* offensive that you needed to forgive them. And if there is any doubt as to how serious the offense was, then you need to make sure you tell your offender. Let them know how much you were hurt but you have chosen to give up the right to get even.

And third, Papa said that ***forgiveness is not trusting***. In other words, just because I forgive you doesn't mean I trust you. And it doesn't mean that our relationship is restored either. Forgiveness and trust are mutually exclusive. Plus, forgiveness is free but the trust needed to restore a relationship is earned. I can forgive you immediately, that is, I can give up the right to get even, but you need to win back my trust, and that will take some time.

That's what Joleen didn't understand about forgiving her dad. She said that forgiving her dad wasn't going to make their relationship better and she was right. Forgiveness is just the start. It only makes reconciliation possible. Forgiveness only takes one person but reconciliation takes two.

So, forgiveness is not forgetting, it's not excusing or trusting. It's giving up the right to get even. But how do you get there? What's the key to forgiveness? I think if you want to forgive and move on you have to accept the fact that your offender can't give you your life back. I found a quote this week from Lily Tomlin about forgiveness. She said...

Forgiveness is when you finally give up all hope for a better past. Lily Tomlin

That's our problem. We want the life that we had before we got hurt. And we go crazy trying to make a better past. But it's never going to happen. It's like squeezing water from a rock. If you insist on it you just go from resentment to bitterness to hatred and your life keeps getting darker and darker. You'll never make a better past. But you can make a better future.

So you need to shift your focus off of your past and onto your future. Shift your focus off your offender and onto God. Instead of insisting your offender gives you back your old life, ask God to give you a new life. He knows how to do that!

You see, when you shift your focus you suddenly find hope. It's like opening a window and getting some fresh air. You quit walking down the same dead end every day and find a freeway to a new life. You get your life back. It's not the life you had. It's different. But it can still be good. I hope you see that.

I'd imagine that as I spoke today some people have been coming to mind, people that you need to forgive. I hope you'll make that choice. It's a choice that only you can make. Forgiveness isn't dependent on anyone but you.

Now, if you choose to forgive, some of you are good to go. You know what to do. You don't need any help. You just have to do what you know is right. Others might need some encouragement so let me give you a couple recommendations:

1. *How to Release Your Anger...for Good!* A four hour CD seminar, also in workbook format. Purchase it in the lobby or at www.lifechangeseminars.net.
2. Celebrate Recovery. Every Monday night at 7:00 p.m. in the Cedarbrook Center. Right now we are focusing on forgiveness through July. Remember; Celebrate Recovery isn't just for alcoholics, it's for anyone struggling with any kind of issue; anger, depression, anxiety, weight issues, codependency, etc.

Prayer- Father, I know there are people here today with broken relationships that need forgiveness. Some need to offer it and some need to receive it. As we approach Father's Day next Sunday I think of all the dad's that desperately need to forgive and be forgiven. Might this week be the time that we finally take action. I pray for us as a church that we will become

experts at forgiveness, not just in the knowledge of it but in the practice. And might we be a resource for others that long for reconciliation as well. Amen.

Going Deeper

Use the following questions for personal reflection or to discuss with your family, friends or small group.

1. What is it about forgiveness that you find difficult?
2. Talk about the impact that God's forgiveness has had in your life.
3. Do you reflect that forgiveness in your relationships? Why or why not?
4. Read Matthew 6:12. What is the standard for our forgiveness?
5. What are some things that characterize Jesus' forgiveness toward us?
6. Talk about how you've seen forgiveness and/or unforgiveness impact a life (maybe your own).
7. Read Matthew 18:21-35. Why do you think forgiveness is so central for followers of Jesus?
8. What do you need to do this week to move toward forgiving someone?