

Psalm 95: 1-5  
John 4: 5-30

“Projection?”

R. P.C.  
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Daniel D. Robinson, Pastor

“I know what you are up to here,” the university senior said to his pastor as he emerged from the Easter morning church service. “I have been studying about all of this in my philosophy class at the university.” “This is what the philosopher Feuerbach calls “projection.” “You Christians took your need for a belief in the immortality of the soul and PROJECTED it on the story of Jesus, and that is how you get this fantasy story of the empty tomb, of Easter – of this whole idea of resurrection.”

That student was expressing a widely-held view of religious faith in our modern world and culture: the idea of projection. One definition of the term ‘projection’ is “the act of visualizing an idea as an objective reality.” It is like wanting something to exist so much that we make it exist in our minds whether it is real or not – It’s kind of like wishful thinking, only much stronger; it’s like a fantasy that is believed to be reality – like that Jimmy Stewart movie about ‘Harvey’ the rabbit.

Sigmund Freud, who called himself “a godless Jew,” used the idea of ‘projection’ to explain humanity’s need for religion from a psychological perspective. He said religion is simply a human way of projecting all of our unresolved conflicts and unfulfilled yearnings related to our parents. All of these infantile and youthful conflicts and this unfinished business we have with our parents, we call “God.”

Even Karl Marx the “father of the political theory of communism” made use of the notion of projection. He argued that ‘capitalists’ bosses had a need to somehow control a docile, unmotivated workforce. So the bosses projected their needs for production and control by further suppressing, and oppressing their workers by making production a “god.” That notion kind of fits when we consider the emphasis we North Americans place upon ‘the Puritan Work ethic,’ and high calling and value we say that God puts upon good work, and for us to be good workers – good producers.

But if religious faith is nothing more than projection – if it is nothing more than our inflated wishful thinking for justifying our needs, wishes and desires – then we who gather here this morning are the most foolish of all fools, aren’t we? Is religious faith simply a figment of our fertile imaginations, as some non-believers and skeptics say about us as believers? Is what we call “God” simply the

consolidation of HUMANITY'S wishes and projections and desires all wrapped up in one loud voice?

Unfortunately, we have to admit that there are times when we believers have given the world good reason for such suspicions. Too often we Christians do present Jesus as the fulfillment of all of our desires – as simply another means or technique for getting what we want out of life. Consider for example the content of our prayers – so often we ask God for things, as if we are pre-school children formulating a Christmas wish-list. Yes, certainly, Jesus tells us to pray for our needs. But praying for a winning lottery ticket, or a parking place when you are late for a meeting? Seriously? No wonder critics of our faith suspect that Jesus is little more than the projection of our little desires and the protector of our comfortable way of life here in North America. It's like the honesty of one of the Greek philosopher who said that "the gods of the Persians look a great deal like the Persians." Are we too guilty of 'creating God in our own image' so as to do our bidding?

Yet, if we take the time to spend a little time with faithful Christian people, exploring with them their religious experiences, something becomes apparent. In talking with other Christians about their faith, have you ever noticed how the conversation inevitably turns to how their faith FEELS to them? Most Christians in describing their faith or their faith journey will tell you that their faith is not something they simply "cooked up in their minds." Most will eventually tell that their faith is something that happened to them; most will say that what they have come to believe has come from somewhere beyond themselves.

Faithful Christians are mostly amused if someone tells them, "Your religion is merely a projection of your fondest desires." Why are they amused? Because who would ever purposely project a Savior who dies on a cross? And who would project a discipleship that requires and demands so much of its followers – taking up a cross in following?

The Christian faith doesn't FEEL like a projection at all. What it feels like is the acquisition of a new set of desires - a call to a new form of service that we would likely never have adopted on our own before faith. It feels like something has happened to us rather than something we would have ever wished or desired on our own. It feels more like the imposition of another set of needs and desires that are being laid upon us, which frankly conflict with what we naturally and selfishly want to be or do.

We human beings have long demonstrated that we are quite adept at inventing all kinds of 'gods' with whom we can get quite cozy. We like the feel of the gods

of money and power, so we tend to idolize them. We like the feel of the perception that we have a good measure of independence as we control our own destinies.

But this Jesus, who lived and lives among us, and who confronts us with his words – this Jesus who died on the cross for our sins - this Jesus whose presence and demands sometimes baffle us, often confound us, and certainly stretch us – this Jesus could never be a projection of our desires and wishes. He has never been nor ever will be a ‘cozy little god of our making. He never lets us mold him into “our own image.”

In our gospel lesson for today, we shared the wonderful account found in the Gospel of John, about Jesus and the woman at the well. When we carefully study the conversation between Jesus and this woman there is almost a sort of amusing quality to it. It is even difficult to call the words that were shared a conversation. The woman asks a question, Jesus answers – but his answers elude her. He says something - she says something, but their words seem to sail right past each other. She is often depicted in the account as being confused, and the more Jesus talks the more confused she becomes.

The “conversation” goes on for 20 verses, making it the longest conversation recorded in the gospel of John. And at the end, the woman is left stunned. A little later she says to her friends and perhaps to herself: “I have met a man who told me everything. He can’t be the Messiah, can he?”

Jesus seemed often to have that effect on people, especially as he is depicted in the Gospel of John. Remember how last week we shared the account of Nicodemus, who hears Jesus speaking of “being born from above,” and of the “wind,” and Nicodemus cannot determine if Jesus is speaking about the actual wind or the Spirit. Does Jesus do this on purpose to people? Is he intentionally vague? Does he take delight in speaking double talk and keeping people confused?

Some years ago, when digital cameras first hit the market, Karin and I decided to purchase one as a present for one another. The salesclerk was quite knowledgeable about the features on all the models, and talked for some time in terms that were foreign – at least foreign to me. She spoke of “mega pixels,” “Mega bites” C.G.I, and “J-peg format.” Karin had read up on such cameras, and understood the language. All I wanted to know is, which one takes good pictures ... for the least amount of cost! Is that the same problem the Samaritan woman was having here with Jesus? Was she confused by his new language – the usage of old terms in a new way?

I seriously doubt that Jesus was intentionally confusing her. Rather he speaks to her of a world she has not yet entered or experienced. That means this world to which Jesus invites her cannot be a projection of her needs or desires. Let's remember that Jesus comes to her and speaks to her first!

We also need to remember that she is identified as a Samaritan, which means that she and her people would have had a really difficult time even dealing with Jesus. Add to that, she was a woman; and here she was talking to a single man in the open marketplace – something that just wasn't allowed in that day. It was a sight so counter-cultural that even the Twelve were astonished at Jesus. So here is Jesus, not only jumping right over the boundaries of social propriety, gender, and nationality, but jumping right over the entire culture to invite her into a world she has never known.

Did you notice in this account that the woman at the well is not looking for anything there – at least for nothing more than water. She did not set out that day searching for “living water.” She never even imagines that such a thing exists, let alone is available for her. Here she is a woman – a Samaritan woman – one who is hated by and presumably hates Jews. Yet Jesus approaches her, and the whole thing seems so odd.

But this is actually a hope-filled story – hope-filled for people like us too. Some of us may have come to church today looking for something more. Maybe we were hoping to find a deeper meaning to life, or a reason to make a change in our living. Maybe we were simply looking for a reason to get out of bed and face a new day! So we must be careful, because in our yearning, we might latch on to something that is merely what WE THINK we need. Our perceived needs can deceive us, and we are often the last person to know what we REALLY need.

And that is why this account brings us a sense of hope. This woman that Jesus met was minding her own business, trudging a dusty road in the noonday sun to get water at a well, when she is met by Jesus. He approaches her and asks the first question. She didn't ask for him; she wasn't looking for him; she wasn't seeking some definition for “living water.” Rather he speaks to her of things she could not know before she met him. He tells her of the availability of a treasure she did not even know she was looking for.

And that so often the way Jesus approaches us.....Jesus could never be a projection of our needs or desires. Rather he comes to us and speaks to us of a need deeper than any of us thought we had. He seeks us out before we ever go to the trouble to look for him. Our relationship to him is dependent upon HIS initiative to invite us, not the reverse.

Remember the opening story for this sermon about the student who confronted his pastor with the whole notion of Easter and resurrection being a projection of our human desires for immortality, and a life after this one? Well, the pastor of that church responded to that challenge this way:

“Projection? I don’t think so.... If you will note in the Easter accounts, no one was looking forward to or expecting Easter or an empty tomb. The news of the resurrection was first proclaimed by women, and in that day and time, women could not even be witnesses in court because their word was not valued as trustworthy. And when the word of the resurrection of Jesus got back to the disciples, they were not necessarily pleased about it.”

“Actually, their predominant emotion was still fear. In fact, you may remember they huddled in fear in an upper room whose door was securely locked. The main thing they discussed in that upper room was not likely, ‘Wow, now we are going to live forever!’ Rather they probably said, ‘He’s back! Now what does that mean for us?’”

“Remember this is the same Jesus who had demanded so much of them in terms of discipleship – the same Jesus whose words and teaching needed constant further explanation. Those two or three years of following him had not always been pleasant: The Pharisees were always spying on them and constantly criticized. Jesus has nearly gotten them all arrested and killed. And now he had come back to them – apparently for good! That meant that his call for service and sacrifice was continuing. There was no returning home now.”

“Thus the resurrection of Jesus may have been regarded by his disciples as more of a problem than a blessing. No, if they had PROJECTED a Savior, it likely wouldn’t have been one like THIS one!” concluded the pastor.

This is the same Jesus who comes to us still. He initiates the conversation by saying, “follow me.” He intrudes upon our lives to meet need that we did not even know we have. He offers us living water to quench a thirst we did not even know we had. He invites us to a new world – a new kingdom – we never before knew existed.

And all of this is because of his PROJECTION: the projection of a world redeemed, of a world made new... His promised projection of the Kingdom of God - jumping right over OUR wants, needs and desires, to provide us with more ... more than we can ever imagine..... Amen.

