

A Sermon for Easter 6, Year A  
Acts 17:22-31 & 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 3:13-22  
April 27, 2008  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *Don't Worry, God Isn't Angry.*

**F**or several years, my favorite theologian was an Episcopal priest named Robert Farrar Capon. His writings on the parables of Jesus are, in my opinion, little short of genius. But Capon is getting on in years, and he hasn't been writing much lately, and I didn't know who I was going to turn to next. So, about eighteen months ago, I was delighted to discover a new theologian, a young man named Rob Bell. Even though he is the pastor of one of the fastest growing non-denominational churches in the country (Mars Hill Bible Church, Grandville, MI: [www.marshall.org](http://www.marshall.org)), he could easily have been an Episcopal priest, and he and I could have been theological soul mates. But I'll tell you all a secret: the reason I like Capon and Bell so much, is not because they're two theologians with whom I agree, but rather because they're two theologians – and they're published and popular to boot – *who agree with me!* I can't tell you how good that feels.

Anyway, Rob Bell has been a busy boy. Not only is he the pastor of a fantastically successful parish, he has also been producing the NOOMA video teaching series, he's been writing books, and he has been on two speaking tours. In fact, last Fall, when Peggy and I learned that Bell was going to be speaking here in town, we went to see him.

Now, I've got to tell you, that going to hear Bell speak, was like going to a rock concert – there was that same kind of excitement and anticipation in the crowds waiting to get in – except that the people were dressed well, and behaved nicely. And Bell looked nothing at all like what I expected from a contemporary Christian theologian: He wore a black, short-sleeved shirt, black jeans, white tennis shoes, and a white belt. He looked something like a Goth version of Urkel, but he was more appealing. A contributing writer for *Christian Century* magazine, a woman named Kelly Lyn Logue, was at one of Bell's tour stops, and described the audience's response in this way:

“This “dude had rock star appeal – it was evident in the standing ovation and whoops and hollers he received. But it wasn't like clapping for the great preachers at a preaching conference or even for Billy Graham. It was more like the combined energy of an Indigo Girls concert and an ethics lecture by Stanley Hauerwas. We were caught up in the strange fire-like feeling that we had just heard real truth and needed to go to a bar to talk it out.”

Now, Peggy and I didn't go to a bar after hearing Bell talk; as I recall, it was almost ten o'clock and so we went home, and went to bed.

But, Bell spoke to us for nearly 90 minutes without interruption, and described how our ancestors had used the ancient religious sacrificial system, of offering animals and crops (and, sometimes, even children!) on their stone altars, to appease the gods, and make themselves feel safer, and make their lives seem more secure. And I found it interesting that, even though Bell talked more about Abraham – and his aborted attempt to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah – than he did about Jesus, the Gospel message was still very clear. And by the time Bell actually got to the story of Jesus, we were already connecting the dots in our minds: That is, that the willing sacrifice of Jesus, and his resurrection, put an end to our need for blood sacrifices to somehow earn God’s good graces.

And then, Bell talked about all of the “extreme and unhelpful religiosity” that is still going on in the church today, and how people are still desperately trying to put things right with God, and how there is seemingly nothing that some people won’t sacrifice to that end. And if the news about that fundamentalist Mormon group’s compound in Texas proves to be accurate, then even children are not safe within certain faith communities. All of which, according to Bell, suggests that we really haven’t advanced all that much since the days of Abraham and Isaac. In fact, Logue, whom I quoted earlier, also said this:

“The most prophetic (thus most controversial) thing Bell said that ... night was that if the worship we are participating in on Sunday mornings is making us feel bad about ourselves, then it is not Christian worship.”

Now, I’ve taken so much time to talk about all this, because, when Bell was talking about all of the “extreme and unhelpful religiosity” he was seeing in the church today, he was describing me to a tee, and how I used to be early in my Christian walk. I won’t go into any specific details, but I know that Peggy can provide you with enough anecdotes to persuade you that, at one time in my faith journey, I was a cold, heartless so-and-so of a Christian, and Born Again to boot. For example, if some passage in the Old Testament prescribed stoning for disobedient and disrespectful children, my attitude was, well, the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it. And it took me a lot of years to come to the realization of just how wrong I was. And it took my reading the Bible carefully – the whole of the Bible – to really open my eyes to see passages like these:

In Isaiah 66, I read about God saying to his people: “As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you.”

In Jeremiah 31, God said to his people: “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”

And, in Hosea 11, I discovered God saying: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. It was I who taught Ehhraim to walk, taking them by the arms. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love.”

These passages, and so many more, virtually celebrate God's unconditional and unqualified love for us. And it took a long time – probably a *very* long time by Peggy's reckoning – for me to understand that there was nothing reciprocal, or conditional, or even contingent in God's love for us. And, I suppose, it took my being a parent, and experiencing a father's love for his children, before I could begin to really understand, and appreciate, and *believe in* God's love for me. And I suppose it took my being a priest to be able to understand the sort of sacrifice that God really wants.

Last evening, Peggy and I watched Laura getting ready for her senior prom. And I thought about how both of our girls – they're young women now, really – have come so far. I thought about what it required of Peggy and me to bring them to this day and place. And I suddenly realized that the sorts of sacrifices which please the gods – that please *our* God – are the sacrifices which parents make for their children, which parishioners make for their church, and which people make for each other. These are sacrifices, in other words, which don't demand lives, but rather which *offer* life.

I said, at the outset of this sermon, that Rob Bell is one of my favorite new theologians. But it's not his theology that is new, but simply the way that he presents it. For the message Bell is presenting is as old as time itself. Certainly, it's a message that's been misunderstood at times, and twisted into horrible shapes at other times. But the core truth has always been the same: The God who made us loves us more than we can imagine – and more than many of us can ever believe – and that the only sacrifices he wants offered to him, are those made on the altar of our hearts. Yes, it's an old theology, but it still requires a new reading with every new generation. And I can't wait to see to see who God will raise up to be the theologian for the next generation.