

# Is There One True Creek?

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1 John 4: 7-9

**7**Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. **8**Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. **9**This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

Greetings, etc. I'm pleased to be with you this morning, but also a little nervous, partly because I don't know most of you, and partly because sermons are supposed to contain ideas, to be useful, to *give* you something. This may seem strange coming from somebody like me, but I don't really think I have many ideas. Especially when it comes to preaching, I often feel like I have no ideas at all. I do have opinions, of course, and feelings, and grudges, and loves—plenty of loves. I've read a lot, and had the good fortune to meet and talk with a lot of fine, smart, wonderful people of all sorts. But when it comes to writing a sermon, all my ideas desert me. This is true even though I've heard plenty of sermons in my day, and I know how they're supposed to go. Opening scripture, pithy anecdote, development, another anecdote (funny), application, edifying conclusion. Right?

But I suspect you've all heard many such sermons too, some quite fine, some less so; so maybe you'll forgive me for doing something slightly different. So let's call this a meditation; it will weave together a number of poems, and some commentary and reflection on them. There may be an idea or two, or seven—but mostly they will be ones that I've taken from others, especially poets and theologians that I encountered while working on a book on “theopoetics”—about approaching theological questions from the point of view of a poet, more interested in image and metaphor than in closely reasoned, logical, orderly discourse.

Poems don't come from ideas, though they may have ideas in them. They come, in my experience, from particular moments of existence, from memory, from desire in all its strange, wild, unpredictable manifestations. They take shape in language, which also includes but is not defined by ideas. And so I hope you'll also listen for the particulars in the poems, the things of the world, the sounds and rhythms, the textures. Those matter to me at least as much as the ideas.

To begin, just a few lines from Franz Wright, a heartbreakingly fine poet who died recently, son of another wonderful and troubled American poet, James Wright, who grew up in Martins Ferry on the Ohio River.

*God is love,  
they say,  
in human words.*

-Franz Wright

This bit of verse captures a difficult problem: that all we say about God must be said in language, and in human language at that, even while we also stipulate that God is bigger, wilder, stranger, and more complicated than we are. We read the Bible, and it seems clear enough sometimes, including perhaps when it says “God is love.” But what exactly does that mean, and what follows? If God *is* love, what does God want of us, of the world, of the universe? As I listen, it seems there is very little agreement among those who claim to be Christians about just what it means to act out this love in the world—and some of these people demand things that seem to have very little to do with love as I understand it.

I’m going to take my stand here with those who believe that God really is wilder and stranger than we are—which is pretty wild and strange—but that God’s purposes really do align along the axis of love.

Here’s an Anabaptist anecdote for you. Folklore has it that long ago, when my Amish-Mennonite ancestors in central Illinois had just been through one of those schisms that have long beset our little group of would-be followers of Jesus, they would sometimes meet on the gravel roads on Sunday mornings, on the way to their respective churches. “We have the true religion!” someone in the buggy headed north would shout, and the patriarch (one presumes) in the buggy headed south would answer, “No, we have the true religion!”

What divided these good souls? They agreed, I’m quite sure, on many things. The critical issues that divided them, I seem to remember, included the parting of hair, and the wearing of rings, including modest wedding bands like mine. The details have become hazy in my mind, and at this distance, just a century or two, the division seems foolish. In fact, the descendants of all those churches now part their hair and wear rings, two of the churches joined back together a decade or so ago, after too many of the farm kids went off to college and didn’t come back . . . and I just went to my niece’s wedding at one of those churches, which has a convenient middle aisle for brides to walk down.

As some people have noticed, despite all our claims of having the true religion, the actual direct information we have from God is fairly scant, and testimony about it often conflicts. Theologian John Caputo wrote a whole book examining this phenomenon, *The Weakness of God*. I can’t begin to trace his whole argument here, but this poem has a few of his lines, and some of my own fumbling fascination with his thoughts:

Meditation with Wallet, Eyeglasses, and Little Riley Creek  
“*The weak force of God settles down below in the hidden interstices of  
being, insinuated into the obscure crevices . . .*”  
-John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*

Which card is it that will open the steel door?

I know that one card will take me anywhere, or almost, and another will tell the  
authorities they should let me on the plane.

The kingdom of God, says Caputo, is like a beautiful old poem whose author is  
completely unknown.

My glasses have tiny rainbow sparkles on each lens, spreading as I scrape at them.  
[[The anti-scratch coating is separating, the office worker says sweetly, sometimes that happens, sorry they are not under warranty, well it's been two years and I will have to ask the doctor, what if something has changed?]]

The idea of one true religion, Caputo says, makes no more sense than the idea of one true poem.

For the fourth day in a row the brown roar of the creek bears tons of topsoil and effluvia toward the ocean.

Is there one true creek?

God is a *weak* force, says Caputo, a call, an event, a voice. All the rest is rouged and painted theology, the invention of men wishing to be strong.

If I scrape the anti-scratch coating entirely away, will I see something new?

If God is great but not strong . . . I take a deep breath, let it out.

A wren in the pine tree, pecking at the new cones, visible only when it moves.

It leaves a branch quaking as it disappears.

Mennonites seem to find it difficult to agree on much, except that most people get most things wrong. We believe, we claim, in peace and in love and in being “in the world but not of it.” We believe that these things are so important that we should sacrifice, suffer, even die, rather than compromise with “the world.”

But we have (I think) rather grandly and sometimes disastrously misunderstood “the world” and how much we are not just in but of the world. We have unconsciously—and sometimes consciously—taken up some of the worst of the world’s ways, and our practice of them has done untold damage to those both within and without our fellowships.

Probably you know where I am going with this. Mennonites have done at least passably, all things considered, at practicing peace and justice in some spheres. Many of us, at least, have tried to stand against the war machine. Many of us have attempted to resist the materialism and consumerism that surround us, to stand with the poor, to help those whose lives have been disrupted by disasters. We have done far less well, however, at resisting those aspects of culture, of “the world,” that have silenced and marginalized and oppressed those defined as “other”—people of color, women, our LGBTQ brothers and sisters.

Why should this be so? Rather than offer a brief explanation in an hour or so, I’ll just say here that we’re hardly alone, and suggest that a main impulse of the new Mennonite writing has been to question the self-satisfied Mennonite narrative. “Yes, we’re not perfect,” it goes, “but we

sure are peaceful, aren't we?" These writers remind us that our peaceable communities have all too often contained great measures of covert violence, and that our ideology of nonresistance and humility has too often served to silence the victims of that violence. Here's a brief excerpt from Julia Spicher Kasdorf's "Writing Like a Mennonite":

"When the man was done, I would let his wood-framed cellar door slam shut and walk home through the backyards, thinking, 'Well, that was not so bad. It was only my body.' I think that the martyr stories taught me that wonderful splintering trick: it is only the body.

"Writing is a process by which suppressed feelings come to consciousness. The wound becomes a mouth that finally speaks its testimony, thereby transforming a mute, confused victim into a subject with a clear vision of her experience and a literate voice." (172 in *TS*).

So the victim becomes a subject, no longer condemned to silent suffering, able to speak, to stand up, to resist the stock narrative. Another woman who stood up and asked serious questions about our stock narratives is Grace Jantzen, who grew up MB in Saskatchewan but spent her too-brief academic career as a lesbian Quaker theologian in England. Jantzen did some amazing work on the Old Testament, especially on the motif of Yahweh as warrior. Again, I'll read a poem that includes a few of her ideas and my reflections on them.

Meditation with Muddy Woods and Swinging Bridge

*[The covenant] is structured in violence and steeped in blood, from the blood of circumcision and endless animal slaughter to brutal extermination of the 'people of the land.'*

-Grace Jantzen, *Violence to Eternity*

Hot wind from the west. Trail still soft after a whole week's drying.

Deer tracks, coon, one stubborn mud-hiker's deep scours, each like a little boat or a long wet nest.

[[Wood piled everywhere--neat rows for woodstoves, heaps of trash and branches.

We were in Salzburg when a great storm scattered the old trees on the Kapuzinerberg like pickup sticks.

Today I brought nothing but pens, keys, comb, notebook, bicycle, lock, wallet and credit cards.

And knees a big black fly seems to like, and shorts with a pocket ripped two summers ago, still not fixed.]]

Morning reading: What kind of God would drown every living thing that wouldn't fit on some puny ark? Would slaughter the people of Canaan for the sake of one hungry band of nomads?

Many good gravel paths lead from the subdivision into the woods, but only the animals use them.

Somebody's cutting something hard in a dry swimming pool.

Who discovered we could cast our anger at the sky and get it back named God?

In my old house the bathroom sink plugs up every four months but I know exactly  
how to swear and clear it.

Small white blooms all over the multiflora rose, bushes twice my size.

Seed pods float in the pond like mothers determined to tan whether or not their  
children get lost in the bushes.

On a day this hot and green it seems crazy to think that God picks sides.

One plank of the swinging bridge is missing, one bowed and soft, and a big lost  
branch is wedged high between the end posts, but I walk across it anyway.

*The god you worship is the God you deserve*, said Joseph Campbell. Do we worship an angry God who delights in tormenting most of His children throughout eternity? A tribal God who leads us into battle, who will destroy our enemies, their soldiers and women and children and babes, so that we may have their land for our own? A God who above all is worried about maintaining a narrow definition of sexual purity, drawing a firm line between some kinds of love and others, and telling all those who don't fit the "traditional" patterns that they just won't do?

These are partly rhetorical questions, as I'm sure you can tell. To remind you of where we started, we also hear, repeatedly, that God is love. With that in mind, let me close with two more poems, a longish one and a short one. The first is a rather brash and perhaps comic poem that grew out of, yes, a Mennonite conference (though it was on "the family").

The Cookie Poem

*"Here are my sad cookies."*

The sad cookies. The once and future cookies.  
The broken sweet cookies. The cookies  
of heartbreaking beauty. The stony cookies  
of Palestine. The gummy and delicious  
olive and honey cookie. The pasty  
damp cookie trapped in the child's hand.

Sad cookies, weird cookies, slippery  
and dangerous cookies. Brilliant helpless  
soiled and torn cookies, feverish and sweaty  
cookies. Sullen cookies, sassy cookies,  
the cookies of tantrum and the cookie of joy  
and the sweet dark cookie of peace.

The faithful cookie of Rotterdam. The wild-eyed  
cookie of Münster. The salty Atlantic cookie.  
Cookies in black coats, in coveralls,  
in business suits, cookies in bonnets

and coverings and heels, cookies scratching  
their heads and their bellies, cookies utterly  
and shamelessly naked before the beloved.

Cookies of the Amish division, cookies  
of the Wahlerhof, cookies of Zurich and  
Strassburg and Volhynia and Chortitza,  
Nairobi Djakarta Winnipeg Goshen.  
Cookies who hand their children off  
to strangers, who admonish their sons  
to remember the Lord's Prayer, cookies  
who say all right, baptize my children  
and then sneak back to the hidden church anyway.  
Cookies who cave in utterly. Cookies  
who die with their boots on. Cookies  
with fists, and with contusions.  
The black hearted cookie. The cookie with issues.  
Hard cookies, hot cookies, compassionate  
conservative cookies, cookies we loathe  
and love, cookies lost, fallen, stolen,  
crushed, abandoned, shunned. Weary  
and heroic cookies, scathingly noted cookies,  
flawed cookies who did their best.  
Single cookies, queer cookies, cookies of color,  
homeless cookie families sleeping in the car,  
obsolete cookies broken down on the information  
highway. Sad cookies, silent cookies,  
loud cookies, loved cookies, your cookies  
my cookies our cookies, all cookies  
God's cookies, strange sweet hapless cookies  
marked each one by the Imago Dei,  
oh the Father the Son the Mother the Daughter  
and the Holy Ghost all love cookies,  
love all cookies, God's mouth is full  
of cookies, God chews and swallows and flings  
hands wide in joy, the crumbs fly  
everywhere, oh God loves us all.

And the second poem I wrote on the shore of a lake whose name I don't remember,  
somewhere in the midst of the Boundary Waters, where it seemed the border between this world  
and the next was perhaps thinner than it usually is.

#### Contemplation with Borrowed Tent

Where did the birds go when the wind  
put their little nest down--side up

in the low blueberries? Had they left already?  
I want to think they need no single home,

that when they tire they settle anywhere  
and then sail off in their dreamboats

to no place I can name. But my friends  
all know I'm often wrong, I think everything

will work out just because I don't want  
to fix it myself. I don't even know the time

but I'm weary, I hope to sleep tonight,  
my borrowed bag is waiting

in my borrowed tent and I am not  
a bird, I want a home however frail,

however temporary. On the far shore  
just above the trees is a lens of open sky

like the entrance to paradise,  
like the doorway to the dream I had

last night when I didn't even think  
I was sleeping. And the fresh wood

I had piled on the fire cracked  
at last and broke into flame.

Even as someone who lives as privileged a life as anyone could want, as a straight white male with tenure and no mortgage and a set of fine, loving, beloved, and mainly healthy relatives, I feel very deeply that yearning to be at home, to dwell where one can feel at peace with God and our neighbors, where one can love and be loved. Only in heaven, perhaps, will that dream become fully real. But let us make our circles bigger. Let us make sure that all of our children know they are beloved. Let us be people who create homes and churches and a world where God's love becomes real through us.

You children and young people (who may or may not be listening after all these words) will still very likely go away when it's time, many of you. That is the way the world works, and it's not a bad thing. But let it be that those of us who are no longer young will not force you into the world because you are not welcome at home, but release you of your own choosing and with our blessing. May you take us with you when you go, and return to find joy and love awaiting you. May all of us, young and old, do all we can to love each other, to find the love that is God in ourselves and in every one of God's blessed creatures. Amen.

