

“WHAT I’D SAY TO GOD IF GOD REALLY IS IN CHARGE”

**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen
Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
2600 E. Philip Ln.
P.O. Box 1791
Appleton, WI 54912-1791
(920) 731-0849
Website: www.fvuuf.org**

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Sermon

A couple years ago, a friend of mine gave me a book of poetry called *Bucolics*. The author of the poetry is Maurice Manning, a forty-year-old English professor at Indiana University. I had never heard of him. I had heard the word “bucolic” before, but I needed to look it up to refresh my memory. It means “of or pertaining to the pleasant aspects of the country life or the countryside.”

The seventy-eight poems in the volume are indeed grounded in a rural setting. The voice of the poet seems to be that of a farmer. But the poems are not all sweetness and light. Some of them are praisesongs for the beauty of nature and farming, but there is also a lot of wondering about life’s questions, a lot of doubt, and even a fair bit of quarrelling and complaining. All of it—the praise, the questions, the doubts, the quarrelling, the complaining—are addressed to a character labeled “Boss.” This is where the poetry gets really interesting: Boss clearly is God. As one of the testimonials in the front of the book puts it: the poems are “a postmodern conversation with a version of a higher power (called) ‘Boss.’”¹ They aren’t exactly conversations though, because Boss never actually says a word.

Picturing God as a boss is an unusual angle on the divine. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a stained glass window with God pictured as a boss. The image probably doesn’t work for some people—especially if their own boss is considerably less than divine. Or if Michael Scott, the boss in *The Office*, pops into your mind.

But the image works pretty well for me. Maybe this is because I don’t have a boss. Wait a minute—I do have a boss! Actually I have about seven hundred of them! I’m looking at some of them! And let me say this: you look divine!

Now I’ve said numerous times that when it comes to the divine, ultimately I’m agnostic. I’m just not sure whether there is such a thing as God or Goddess or whatever name we give the divine. But if there is, then count me a polytheist. If there is such a thing as the divine, it makes good sense to me to picture It in a multitude of ways. I give expression to this belief whenever I do a public prayer—as I did this week at Dawn Hagen’s Habitat for Humanity house dedication,

¹ Maurice Manning, *Bucolics* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2007). From the beginning testimonials; this one was from *Publishers Weekly*.

Ross Willmington's mother's memorial service, and Lindsay Anderson's and Adam Van Den's wedding. Like a lot of my UU minister colleagues, I start public prayers by saying, "God of many names, mystery beyond all naming..." This is really an expression of polytheism. Polytheism captures the idea that there are many ways to picture and name divinity. In my view: the more the merrier. And here's an important implication of polytheism: no one image of God can ever possibly exhaust the truth about the mystery of the divine.

So I'm delighted to add Boss to the many images and names I use for this possibility called God. For me, it presents a fresh, provocative and illuminating image of the divine.

But enough introduction—let's get to some of Manning's poems! Here's a representative poem from the collection. It gives you a flavor of the poet's style. This poem is a praisesong to Boss:

boss of the blue sky boss
of green water boss of rain
with thunder out in front of it
boss of the flatland bottoming
the hill O Boss you've got
a hundred marvels underneath
your belt so tight you'll have to poke
another hole if you keep bossing
you boss so much you couldn't take
on something else or could you Boss
I guess you could you're good at bossing Boss
you'll keep on being Boss boss of this
boss of that you're not swelled up
with pride you're just a boss
whenever I see the shadow of
your straw hat Boss I get
back at it I know you Boss
you even boss your shade²

The picture that emerges of God/Boss in *Bucolics* is complex (like any boss). Boss has several key characteristics. The characteristics Manning lifts up resonate very well with my picture of God. First, Boss is everywhere. "O everywhere I go you're there/before me Boss,"³ the poet writes. Boss is in the world, and the world is in Boss. If we're looking, we can see Boss in the simplest of things:

O Boss would I

² *Ibid.*, poem # XXIX.

³ *Ibid.*, XV.

see you are you a daisy
the plainest in the field
you common flower Boss⁴

We can even see Boss in death. The poet writes:

you keep a lot of secrets Boss
but now I know a secret too
although the tallest tree may reach
your chin I know one day you'll bend
it over Boss without a speck
of pity not a moment's pause
you'll drag it to the darkest ground
all days go one direction down⁵

So the end will come for each of us and for every living thing—and Boss will be part of it. Death is part of life. So of course death has to be part of God, too.

And Boss is not just part of good things that happen to us, but also bad (and who's to say for sure what's good and what's bad):

not every day is funny no
today's a day that's lifted but
tomorrow might be dragging down
again a day when branches droop
a day when shadows leave the light
alone when the horse is serious
when nothing whinnies nothing neighs
whenever there's a to I know
a fro is coming after it...
Boss
you sender of the sun you rain
for rivers⁶

Boss—God—is in the sun and in the rain.

And, most amazing of all, Boss is even in you and in me: “Are you in my chest Boss,” the poet asks,⁷ and the answer plainly is yes. Boss is everywhere.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XX.

⁵ *Ibid.*, XLIII.

⁶ *Ibid.*, LXI.

⁷ *Ibid.*, XIII.

A lot of the poems in the collection point to a second key characteristic of Boss: Boss has more than a few human qualities. In one poem, for example, the poet asks:

are you ever sorry Boss ever
have a problem ever get
shamefaced stuff you hands
in your big boss pockets
it's never easy is it Boss never...
have you ever had it up to here
wherever that is on you⁸

Of course since Boss never replies to the poet, we really don't know the answer to these questions. But clearly the poet wishes that Boss has some human qualities. It will make Boss seem a little more accessible (in spite of Boss's reticence). It will make Boss seem a little closer, a little easier to relate to. I have the same wish about God: I want a God who's occasionally sorry, who's a little bit like me. I can relate to that sort of God way more than some perfect being who in so many ways is a long ways away from me.

Another thing about Boss is that Boss has a keen and sometimes even devilish sense of humor:

I wonder if that horse's spots are real
or painted on it makes me smile
to think about it Boss even
field hands need a laugh or two
a rusty riddle a twisty tongue
I wouldn't put it past you O
You sneaky devil you cutup Boss⁹

If there is a God, it seems to me that God has to possess a sense of humor. There is just too much that is laughable in life for God not to have a hand in it, or at least to appreciate it. Even in the worst times, there can be some humor. I marvel at the human capacity to laugh even in the midst of devastating things. I see it all the time when I'm with families gathered to witness and comfort a dying loved one. Frequently laughter punctures the tears and the pain. Where does this capacity come from? I'd like to think it has a divine origin. I'd go as far as to say that if God doesn't have a sense of humor, then move me over to the atheist column. I could never believe in a humorless god.

Another characteristic of Boss is that Boss is rather distant. This clearly is a source of unending irritation to the poet. He keeps on talking to Boss, asking questions, and never hears

⁸ *Ibid.*, IX.

⁹ *Ibid.*, IV.

anything back. “My ears get lonely I wish/you’d let me hear from you,”¹⁰ the poet whines. In another poem, he compares Boss to a post:

you hushed-up Boss you’re so much like
a post you make me sigh two feet
stuck in the ground head bone poked
above the sky a dandy cut
from the straightest stretch of the hardest tree
you’d think a post would have a lot
to say O how it doesn’t Boss¹¹

It even feels sometimes like Boss tries to run away—especially when the poet inches closer to truths about Boss. You’re like “a funny little horse” who runs away, the poet says. “I ought to tie you to a tree.”¹² But you can’t tie Boss to a tree.

This picture of a rather distant Boss matches my experience of the Divine. I’ve never heard God speak directly to me. When I pray, it is decidedly a one-sided conversation. Now sometimes I feel like I get answers, but never directly. I have to look for clues. And whenever I seem to inch a tiny bit closer to glimpsing the truth about God, God seems to move a step further away. How I wish I could tie God to a tree like a funny little horse! I can’t. No one can. We can never completely figure out the mystery that is God. Anyone who thinks they have God all figured out has a god who is way too small.

Another characteristic of Boss is that there are limits to what Boss can do. I missed this when I first looked at the book—that’s why the sermon title includes the idea of God being in charge. That’s not actually the message of the book—Boss is in charge as much as any boss, which is to say: not very much. Boss needs the workers to get the work done—Boss cannot do it all on Boss’s own. The workers, it turns out, are the hands of Boss.¹³ Of course, each worker can only help Boss in small ways. But when you add together the little bit that each of us does, it adds up. Manning writes:

the little bit of what
I do for you so small
it hardly matters O
I know it all adds up¹⁴

This totally squares with my understanding of God. If there is a God, I don’t believe that It’s all powerful. It relies on all of us. *We* are God’s hands. We all have to do our part to create

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, LII.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, LXVII.

¹² *Ibid.*, LI.

¹³ *Ibid.*, XXV.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, LXIX.

a just and peaceful world. Creating such a world is not God's work; it's ours. None of us can accomplish this on our own. But working together, we can build a better world. The good deeds do add up.

There is one more characteristic of Boss that appeals to me: Boss helps the poet see the ties that bind us all together:

you make me see belonging Boss
for what it is the thing that holds
it all together like a string
that's tied to everything a loop
that passes from the water to
the bucket Boss the windmill to
the breeze the branch that's swaying from
the hawk that left it for the wind
which lifts the hawk to see the horse
beside the barn¹⁵

All of us, all of existence, everything: it's all interrelated. If there is such a thing as God, then God is part of this vast web, too. If we have a life-giving picture of God, it will help us see and understand this reality of our utter interdependence.

One of the testimonials at the beginning of the book asks, "Are (these poems) prayers? Is this doubt or belief?"¹⁶ I believe the poems are prayers—and they're especially powerful prayers because they include plenty of doubt and questioning and complaining. In my way of thinking, doubt and belief go hand in hand. Together they can lead to wisdom. This is a big part of why I like the book so much. It's part of why I like the Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible, too: in that book, Job's conversation with God—and he actually does have a conversation since God answers him—is full of Job's doubt and complaining. Job is very human—which happens to be what I am.

There's a poem in *Bucolics* which captures this spirit of prayer really well. The poet is telling Boss that we really need some rain—

we being me the tree O every blade
of grass the creatures all the bugs
even the horseflies need a drink

But just to be clear who's asking, the poet tells Boss where he'll be:

I'm waiting Boss beside my stack

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, XXXIX.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, from the beginning testimonials in the book; this testimonial was from Marianne Boruch

of little rocks I've got a string
of yellow feathers tied around
my neck that way you'll know it's me
who needs the rain¹⁷

This certainly injects a wonderful note of doubt into the prayer. He's not sure if God/Boss will know where the prayer is coming from. "Yoo hoo, down here!"

Well, how does all this help me think about God? Let me give a concrete example. Like many of you I imagine, I've been thinking a lot this summer about the oil spill. And I've been thinking about our seemingly unquenchable thirst for oil which underlies the spill, and the intimately related calamity-in-waiting of global warming. Messing up the Gulf of Mexico habitat is a close-up of the bigger picture of what we're doing to our whole human habitat: the earth. So what if God is the Big Boss? What might I want to say to Him/Her/It about the spill? Here's my prayer, written in the style of Manning's prayers to Boss:

why'd you give us the power Boss to build
oil wells a mile beneath the surface
why'd you give us the power to warm our planet
the power to destroy habitats (even our own)
why don't you just fix this mess Boss
you can do it right oh yeah
that's not the kind of boss you are
we're your hands we have to figure it
out we have to do it
darn I don't want to

Even without God answering my prayer directly, this prayer points me to the truth of what I have to do. The tragedy in the Gulf is not God's fault; it's not even all BP's fault. It's also my fault. I am part of the problem, and I am part of the solution. I don't want to be. I'd rather blame BP and otherwise forget about it. But I am part of the problem and the solution. The prayer helps focus me on the only thing I have any control anyway: my own actions.

This picture of God at Boss helps me find some wisdom—in the oil spill and a lot of other things, too.

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¹⁷ *Ibid.*, XLII.