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## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### The Four Gods

Luke 15:8-9

Earlier this month twenty-six year old Liang Wang made his debut as the principal oboist for the New York Philharmonic. He does what no other musician must do, making his own reed every day by carving two hair-thin pieces of wood that attach to the top of his instrument. It would be comparable to baseball slugger Barry Bonds carving his own bat for every game.

*"The oboe is a piercing instrument," Wang says. "You want a reed that makes it warm and colorful as possible to reach out to the audience so people want to hear it. You don't want someone using a needle going at your ear, it doesn't feel good."*

He makes two reeds every day and of those throws many away. Some will only last for a rehearsal; others will last for several concerts. For him, and apparently other oboists, it's more about the reed than the instrument. Wang's desk in his apartment is covered with tools that make it look like a woodworking shop. He starts with cane, small tubular sticks imported from China and France that he says are like wine with some vintages better than others. The cane is soaked in warm water then split with a razor blade. A gouging tool thins the wood then the reed is folded in half and tied with colorful thread to a metal tube called a stable.

Then the hard part begins, refining the reed by hand with a shaping tool, then a fine beveled knife. That's how Wang goes for the sound he wants; a little thinner for Mozart, a little thicker for Mahler. *"Getting the perfect reed is a seemingly endless quest,"* he says. One mistake and he starts all over again.

Since Wang has made so many reeds he was once asked if he has a "reed hall of fame." And he does, they are kept in a case that is opened from time to time. It contains the reed used to win his Cincinnati Symphony audition, the one to clinch a spot with the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra, and the reed used for his last trial for the New York Philharmonic. Wang explains that in the day-in and day-out task of making reeds *"When I get depressed I look at them and they make me happy. They remind me that I achieved something."*<sup>1</sup>

And his story reminds me that we all have the same instrument, yet play it with different reeds. I think the same dynamic is at work when it comes to the role God holds in our lives. Let me explain.

Baylor University has an Institute for Studies of Religion. In the fall of last year they took a representative sample of 1700 Americans by age, gender, and race in a 16 page survey. What is interesting is that Baylor took an approach divergent from the conventional. For example, they asked people to write in the name and address of where they worshipped. Many of the people who said they had no religious identity or affiliation nonetheless named a church they occasionally attended. I have found that to be the case here, people come to explore the dimensions of faith but never perceive themselves as a Catholic or Baptist, or Methodist. That just isn't a part of their background or desire. Denominationalism just doesn't register or interest them.

91.8% of the people in the survey and therefore presumably all of us acknowledge a belief in God. And Baylor's research has determined that we have a tendency to believe in one of four types of God.

**Type # 1 The Authoritarian God:** 31% of Americans believe in a God that is angry at humanity's sins and yet still engaged in every creature's life and world affairs. God is like an overbearing boss who is never satisfied with the competency and performance of the employees. He is a micro manager always looking over everyone's shoulder.

*"Then the Lord said to me: Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, yet my heart would not turn toward this people. Send them out of my sight, and let them go! And when they say to you, 'Where shall we go.' You shall say to them: 'Thus says the Lord: Those destined for pestilence, to pestilence, and those destined for the sword, to the sword; those destined for famine, to famine, and those destined for captivity, to captivity.'*

*And I will appoint over them four kinds of destroyers, says the Lord: the sword to kill, the dogs to drag away, and the birds of the air and the wild animals of the earth to devour and destroy. I will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what King Manasseh son of Hezekiah of Judah did in Jerusalem."* Jeremiah 15:1-4

That is not necessarily the kind of God we would want intervening in human affairs. With an authoritarian God we can find examples of good engagement, but there will also be times when his presence resembles the behavior of a tyrant.

**Type # 2 The Benevolent God:** 23% of Americans feel that God sets absolute standards but is forgiving and welcoming like the father of the prodigal son. This is a God who never gives up and never lets go.

Every year between 35 and 70 people jump from the Golden Gate Bridge. Because of its height above the water line, every jump is fatal for hitting the water is like landing on concrete. Even though a number of safety measures have been put in place through the years when someone is determined to kill himself or herself they most often find a way to succeed. One morning a man driving to work was crossing the bridge just at the

moment the police had shut down the bridge to deal with a woman poised precariously at the railing threatening to jump. The man had a ringside view and could hear the conversation between the police and the woman. Suddenly a policeman lunged forward as the woman started to leap and managed to catch her by the legs. She kicked and squirmed while pleading for the policeman to let her fall. And everyone heard that policeman yell back as he tightened his grip, "I'm going to hold onto you until hell freezes over!"

That is a benevolent God at work, one who despite ourselves will hold on tight refusing to let go until hell freezes over.

**Type # 3 The Critical God:** 16% of people in our country think God has a judgmental eye but doesn't intervene to either punish or comfort. In other words God is around but doesn't do more than carry on as a spectator.

Early in this year's NFL season, the Colts and New York Giants played against each other. The game was billed as the "clash between the brothers." Quarterbacks Peyton and Eli Manning would square off. There was a question about what their parents would do and how they would cheer. Because of the scrutiny they said there would be no cheering, no indication of emotion that might indicate any favoritism. Sure enough, during the game when the camera would focus on them after a great play or score they were seen sitting watching the game, but not much else beyond talking to each other.

It would have been great if this had been scripted into the day, to see the moment when both brothers greeted each other in midfield after the game with handshakes and high fives to see a camera shot of the parents leaping up with wild applause. But that is not a part of what a critical God does; it is never part of the script.

**Type #4 The Distant God:** 24% of Americans see the Eternal as a cosmic force that launched the world, then left it spinning on its own. God is the developer who finishes the project and then moves onto constructing the next subdivision. In this scenario, the Old Testament would have ended after the first two chapters of Genesis.

*Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. Genesis 2:1-3*

Evidently some picture this as the moment when God finished the work and went on a permanent vacation.

In my humble opinion as a parish priest working among the ranks, folk don't tend to imprint on one of these four types. All are a part of our experience and understanding

of God. There are times when we feel God to be the micromanager, or the force in life that doesn't give up and won't let go, or the emotionless spectator in the wings, or the distant power that gave us a good start then moved onto something else.

And from these moments we have shaped and thinned the reed to reach a view of how we believe God operates in the world and our lives. I don't mean to suggest that we will use our wood working tools to create a God in our own image for that would be idolatry. It's more about the process of creating an understanding of God based on our experience. This is the reed we apply to our instrument.

Like Wang perhaps we need a reed or God Hall of Fame; one that marks the best moments of our encounters with the Eternal. During the dark and bright moments of life we can pull out the case and look within. *"I look at them and they make me happy. They remind me that I achieved something" ...something with my God.*

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<sup>1</sup> The source for this story with quotes was a National Public Radio program *All Things Considered* on 9/16/06, *Oboist Liang Wang: His Reeds Come First* by Debbie Elliott.

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