

**“The Bull of Heaven”**  
**Psalm 139 & *The Story of Ferdinand***  
**Andrew Foster Connors**  
**October 30, 2016**

It was early in the formation of “Imago Dei,” the name we gave for the gay straight alliance at Columbia Seminary that my friend caught me off guard with a comment on this Psalm. “The first time I remember reading this psalm,” she told me, “I remember how disturbed I was.”

She caught me off guard since this psalm usually brought me more of a sense of relief. God knows exactly who I am even when I don’t seem to know myself. Even if no other soul on earth knows who I am God, God knows.

But knowing herself wasn’t the problem, my friend explained. “I’ve known I was gay since I was a little girl,” she told me, “but learning that God knows exactly who I am, well that’s been harder to accept. “At first,” she told me, “I couldn’t understand how God could both know that I was created this way and want to punish me for it. But once I knew that God loved me as I am, then I had a different problem. How could God know this about me and about the hatred in our world and continue to allow me and others to suffer?”

It’s a theological question that doesn’t come with a lot satisfactory answers. If God knows everything about us and about our world, why does God allow suffering or injustice to persist? Is God aware but unable to do anything about it? Is God distant and uninterested in us as individuals? Or is God aware of all the evil that happens in our world and unwilling to intervene? Or is God not the powerful agent that our traditional theologies have claimed - fully aware of the evil in our world but powerless to do anything about it?

For the longest time, the church responded to these questions with tidy answers designed to protect God from our interrogation. For traditions unwilling to accept that every misfortune is a punishment or a test from God, God was said to elsewhere, away from our day-to-day struggles which aren’t worthy of God’s direct intervention. God was above it all the church said – a transcendental God, above our suffering, above our evil, above our terrorist attacks or our political divisions, or our exhausting elections. Leaving people in high crime neighborhoods to wonder if God cares about their hunger, the violence in their neighborhood or systems that created those conditions. Leaving people with cancer, or survivors of natural disasters, or families grieving sudden losses to wonder how the church’s claim that God upholds and governs everything speaks to their experience.

Experience has taught me that life is messier than those clear theologies, but parts of our world have a low tolerance for anything that’s not cut and dried. Anything that isn’t clear and straightforward. Anything that’s not black and white, true or untrue, right or wrong, our world doesn’t tolerate well.

Ferdinand lives in that world – one where bulls like him must fit into clear lines of where they belong. To be a bull is to fight. To be a bull is to be fierce. To be a bull is to fit the expectations lined out by other people’s expectations for what a

bull should be. And when Ferdinand rejects that notion by simply being himself, people are not just dismayed, they are furious.

It explains why kids outside the gender binary provoke so much anger and resentment. Why states would rather sue to force them into those binaries instead of just accommodate their differences. It explains how it is that a Republican conservative expert on immigration can be accused of working for the Clinton campaign when he explains the facts of immigration reform.<sup>1</sup> If facts don't fit our expectations, some of us refuse to acknowledge them. It explains how liberals who are concerned about family stability or who are pro-life choose to stay quiet in their circles or their families or even in their church. Anything that's not black and white, true or untrue, right or wrong, our world doesn't tolerate well.

In this kind of a world, Ferdinand chooses to be himself, which is hard to do in a world of pressured expectations. Maybe that's why this book has been banned or burned more than once.

Ferdinand was published in 1936, the same year that war broke out in Spain. Franco and his nationalists on the right wing side of the conflict banned the book because they saw it as a political statement against his regime. The leftist revolutionaries on the other side didn't like the book either because they thought it poked fun of their ideas of revolution. Apparently, no one likes a bull who wants to stay peaceful when both sides believe he should be at war. No one likes a bull that doesn't conform to our usual categories. Hitler ordered the book burned in Germany as "degenerate democratic propaganda." When Berlin fell, 30,000 copies were immediately distributed to the children of Germany. Yet in Stalinist Poland it was the only American children's book allowed. Ferdinand has been called a fascist and a communist, an anarchist and a pacifist. He's been analyzed and labeled as manic-depressive, schizophrenic, and gay. No one likes a bull that doesn't submit to our categories. In the first year of its publication the book eclipsed *Gone with the Wind* on top of the bestseller's list. The author seemed just as caught off guard by the reception of the book as anyone. He wrote the book quickly as a favor for his illustrator friend who needed some work. "It was propaganda, all right," he admitted, but propaganda for laughter only."<sup>2</sup> People don't seem to know what to do with a character that doesn't fit into clear, defined categories.

And maybe that's a good reminder not just for a character like Ferdinand and human beings like him, but for the character of God who refuses to be defined by our narrow categories. Who vexes us because she doesn't conform to our expectations. He won't stay in the boundaries of heaven that we create for him. Walter Brueggemann says that western theology's efforts to limit God to the heavenly throne is misguided. God is not "elsewhere," Brueggemann says, but "in

---

<sup>1</sup> "It's incredibly depressing to see people base their policy opinions on things that just simply are not true, that are basically just myths" Alex Nowrasteh, a conservative policy analyst with the Cato Institute recently told Ira Glas of *This American Life*. "Like, to say otherwise, to state what the facts otherwise are, gets you labeled a traitor or gets you labeled sort of anti-American, or gets you labeled a socialist. All things which I am not. Absolutely not. So it's depressing, and it's hard to fight against." <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/599/seriously?act=1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1986/11/09/ferdinand-the-bulls-50th-anniversary/3325d6dc-cc68-4be7-9569-408439896098/>

the fray' and at risk in the ongoing life of Israel."<sup>3</sup> The testimony of the Bible is not that God is safely here, or reliably there, but that God is inescapable. Not transcendent: elsewhere; not imminent: here. But inescapable.

Which makes me wonder if the character of Ferdinand might be a good stand-in for the character of God. Like those men from Madrid we look for the God who fits our biggest, baddest, most powerful preconceptions. We try to lure that God into the arenas of our lives and then protest when he doesn't do what we think gods are supposed to do. Fulfill our hopes. Perform for us. Entertain us. Credential our projects whether God is interested in them or not. Affirm our way of living whether God approves of them or not. Meanwhile God refuses to submit to our expectations.

If Brueggemann is right, then the task of theology in our time isn't so much to pin down the location of God – whether God is somewhere far or near, but to come to terms with the truth that God is involved with us on God's own terms. As the psalmist says, God knows us.

Yda – that little Hebrew word that means “to know” is one I remember well, and not just because “Yoda knows” is the mnemonic device my classmates and I used to remember it. Yda appears so often in the Old Testament that any student of Hebrew has to memorize it. It describes everything from knowledge of facts to sexual intimacy to a primary attribute of God. That little word appears 7 times in this one Psalm. God knows me. God knows when I sit down and when I rise up. God knows a word before I say it. God knows.

But if you read Ferdinand as a stand-in for God, then it also suggests that God sees us trying to fit God and each other into our narrow categories. God sees us stammer and bluster about ridiculous things. God sees us trying to fit God into our lives as we've organized them instead of listening attentively to find out how we might rearrange our lives according to God's ways. God sees us trying to cart the bull of heaven into the public arenas of our imagination so we can poke and prod until God does what we expect all gods to do.

God sees us – as we are – fearfully and wonderfully made. Or as one translator suggests “awesomely wonderful.” God sees our true selves even, maybe especially when we don't or can't or won't.

If God is like Ferdinand then God is involved in our lives, all right. Involved in our politics, involved in our disappointments. Involved in our losses. But not as we would manipulate god to be intervene. Not as we would strong arm god to be involved. Not as a fascist or a communist, an anarchist or a pacifist. Not as manic-depressive, schizophrenic, gay or straight all of which are categories that we apply to help us divide or understand, control or feel safe. God is involved simply as the one who loves us. Love that can both agitate us and wait for us. Love that can provoke anger in us and delight. God is in the fray with us. The God whose non-conforming ways we can scarcely tolerate. That bull of heaven – whose reach, whose justice, whose love is inescapable.

---

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press), 1997, 83.