

Lovers' quarrel: Arguments and intimacy

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [June 1, 2010](#) issue

When Moses is on Mount Sinai he offers the gutsiest prayer of all time. I'm in awe of it because it doesn't sound at all pious; it sounds like an argument. The Lord says, "Your people, who you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely. . . . Now let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them."

Moses says: "O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt?" (Exod. 32:7-11).

The people are dancing around a gold calf while God and Moses squabble over who has responsibility for them. As in any hot argument, they exaggerate their claims. "Nope," they each insist, "This is your fault." I've had arguments like this with my wife, but never with God.

Amazingly, Moses wins the argument. He doesn't prevail by pleading the people's case with "Sure they're idolaters, but they have so many good traits." Instead he reminds God to be merciful and faithful to what God promised. Essentially Moses says, "You started this—you have to finish it."

By the end of the prayer Moses changes God's mind about blasting the Hebrews out of the desert. Wow. I doubt that any of my prayers have changed God's mind about anything. My fear is that they actually bore God at times.

Frankly, prayer is sometimes boring even in a healthy spiritual life. That's a blessing. No relationship can handle high-drama communication all the time. But even a healthy relationship can occasionally get wrapped up in an argument. That too is a blessing, if arguing reveals an intense investment in the relationship.

Moses had been wandering around on his mountaintop for 40 days. That must have nurtured the gutsiness of this prayer. It was really a lovers' quarrel—Moses and God were so intertwined by this point that even their argument was an expression of intimacy.

The notion of intimacy with God can be misleading. We don't find biblical examples of people drawing close to the heart of God simply because it feels good to be there—although we find such sentimental spirituality in the church today. Moses and God shared an intimacy of mission. They had to lead the people through a harsh desert to a land called Promised.

It wasn't Moses but the clarity of the mission that prevailed. Apparently God cannot resist it when leaders argue for God's own dreams. That is what intimacy with God is about.

This devotion to mission is also evident in what may be the best moment of Moses' life. A furious God tells Moses to get out of the way of the consuming fire that is about to fall on the idolaters and promises Moses a new congregation. I would have been tempted to take that deal. Not Moses. He is more committed to the mission than he is to being delivered from a people whose greatest gift is to be anxious.

What do we contemporary religious leaders do with this prayer? We could say that pastors need to spend more time on the mountaintop with God. But what congregation is excited about its pastor regularly going away for 40-day retreats? Besides, that's when the Hebrews turned to an idol for security and hope. There is only so much retreating a pastor can do and still lead a congregation forward.

Maybe the point isn't the amount of time spent alone with God, but the discipline to pray our way through the confusion and conflicts created by any worthwhile mission. Maybe our prayers need to be more focused on reminding God to be faithful to the holy dream of leading us to the Promised Land. This isn't because God tends to forget, but because these prayers renew our conviction that there are some missions only God can fulfill.

We may wish that we still lived in a culture in which people believed God's mind could be changed, but these days we tend to think of God as above the fray, safely tucked away in the noumenal realm. We believe we can reach God by faith, but not by arguing, not by the dust-and-grit kind of faith we use to keep each other accountable. This only means that the culture has changed, not God.

What if we still believed it possible to look for something other than technology, ideology or feel-good spirituality to save us? What if those of us who knock ourselves out to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly really believed that God is not above the fray but within it as the incarnation proclaims? What if we expected the

merciful kingdom of Jesus Christ to overcome a world that bows before the idols of cruelty?

We would then occasionally pray, “What the heck? God, look around! It is *your* mission, *your* dream, to which we have been called. If we are going to make it to *your* new kingdom, *you* have got to be merciful and faithful.”

Sounds gutsy. But Moses reminds us that if we are going to have a lovers’ quarrel, we will first have to be lovers with God.