

LET'S TALK ABOUT GOD

(01/21/18)

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 2:23-3:15
John 14:1-14

“God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am.’” (Exodus 3:14)

“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever who has seen me has seen the Father.’” (John 14:9)

This morning I would like to explore our understanding of God from several different perspectives.

Following our Christmas Eve service a few weeks ago, a parishioner told me, “I really appreciated your message. I didn’t know anything about Manichaeism. I feel so stupid.” There is absolutely no reason to feel stupid. Why should you be expected to know about these things? We come from many different religious traditions. Some of us, because our parents weren’t interested or involved, received little or no religious instruction. For many of us, our Christian education ended with our CCD or confirmation class. This is why we need to continually reexamine our basic Christian beliefs as adults. This is the only way our faith will grow.

I also want to remind you that you don’t have to agree with everything I say. If you disagree with with *everything* I say, I’m not sure why you would be here this morning. But I do not speak on behalf of God. Even though I am your pastor, I am a layperson like you. I happen to have been educated, trained, ordained and called to serve this church in a specialized ministry, as a minister of Word and Sacrament, as your pastor and teacher. You are free to disagree with anything I say; I welcome mutually respectful dialogue about these very complex issues.

Our belief that the minister does not speak for God is symbolized in the architectural structure of our sanctuary. In our church, we have a divided chancel. The chancel is the raised part of the sanctuary from the curtain at its edge to the altar. The scripture lessons are read from the lectern, which is to your right (as is the Christian flag), and the sermon is preached from the pulpit to your left. This is a reminder that we have our scriptures, the records of people’s experiences of God, the records of God’s revelation to them and also to us. Then we have the sermon, one person’s attempt to understand a passage of scripture, to help us connect with it, and through it to help us connect more deeply with God.

Because sermons arise out of the faith, the understanding, and the life experience of the preacher, different preachers will preach very different sermons on the same scriptural text. When we write our sermons and when we preach, we pastors pray that the Holy Spirit will guide what we say. This is why, at the beginning of every sermon, I pray “that the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts” will be acceptable in God’s sight.

Because we stand within the Free Church Tradition, our church is not a doctrinal church. We are not held together by a creed. We gather as a fellowship of faith, a community of seekers and pilgrims united by our care and concern for each other and for the world. Because we are not a creedal church, we need to examine and constantly reexamine what we believe. Our beliefs shape our understanding. Our understanding shapes our faith. Our faith shapes and determines the quality of our relationship with God.

The most important theological question is, “What God do we worship?” Some people would answer that they don’t worship any God, that they are atheists. If God, as the theologian Paul Tillich suggests, is that which is of ultimate concern to us, then we all have something that is of ultimate concern. It may be ourselves: our happiness or pleasure or material wealth. It may be our relationship with the Great Spirit who created, sustains, and guides the unfolding of our life. It may be that realm from which we came, to which we will return when we die, and which we carry with us and within us while we are alive. Everyone has something of ultimate concern. Everyone has a God or Gods. The question is, “What God do you worship?”

One Sunday morning, a little girl was drawing a picture. The Sunday school teacher asked her what she was drawing. The little girl replied that she was drawing a picture of God. “But no one knows what God looks like,” replied her teacher. “I know,” said the little girl, “but they will when I’m finished.”

I suspect that many theologians, especially systematic theologians, have believed that when they finished drawing their word picture, everyone would know exactly what God is like. No one has ever been fully successful in this venture, however, and of course no one ever will. Our picture, our understanding of God has evolved throughout the millennia and will, hopefully, continue to evolve. This is why we need a touch of humility in our beliefs and in our preaching.

As recorded in Exodus, God told Moses to go to his people who were captives, slaves in Egypt. Moses replied, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your

fathers has sent me to you,' and if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am."

This response seems like an evasion of a perfectly legitimate question. Moses was aware that there were many gods or many experiences of God. People in hunting-gathering tribes tended to picture a masculine God, a God of the mountains or sky. People who lived in farming communities tended to picture a feminine God, a Great Mother God, a God of the earth.

Nomadic warriors tended to see God as tribal, as belonging to them and no one else. The God of the Israelites falls into this category, for the Israelites speak of their God as "the God of Israel." God belonged to them and to no one else. In II Kings 5:15 we read, "There is no God in all the world but in Israel." To my way of thinking, if God is the personal property of a tribe, this makes God pretty small. But this was how the ancient Israelites understood God.

When God responded, "I am," not disclosing a name by which God could be identified, God was telling Moses that his/her/its being or reality is unable to be captured in words. The most profound statement we can make about God is that God *is*, that God is the Primary Fact, the Ground of all Being, or the Ultimate Concern of the entire universe. We can never know God as God is in himself, herself, or itself, but only as God is revealed to us, and then, necessarily, only in a very limited way. Because of this, no matter how meaningful our revelation, we can never know all there is to know about God. Contrary to what our little girl and the great theologians in the history of the church have believed, the picture can not only never be finished, it can never be truly accurate.

Let me take just a moment to talk about religious language. We human beings have a problem. We not only believe in, we actually experience a spiritual reality that is totally beyond comprehension, a spiritual force or power that created the entire universe, that has shaped its unfolding the past eighteen billion years, and which also dwells with us and within us--in our heart and soul. We human beings have developed a complex and highly sophisticated language, but there are no human words that can do justice to this spirit, to this realm of being.

Aware of this, some mystics in our own and other religious traditions have suggested that we keep silent, for everything we say about God is necessarily so distorted by the limitations of our language that it will be more wrong than right. The 1st poem of the Tao te Ching tells us, "The Tao that can be told his not the eternal Tao." And in the 56th poem, Lao Tsu says, "Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know." And yet, we have to speak about God.

God created human beings and human consciousness so we could experience, understand, and hopefully build a relationship with this spiritual source of all that is. We must speak, but we would be well advised to speak with humility.

God is obviously not someone that can be captured in a picture or photograph, not a thing in the universe that can be located and described. Yet, just like the little girl, we have to picture God in some way. Throughout history, people have attempted to create a mental image of God. Many of these are childish and inadequate concepts, e.g., pictures of God as a white man seated on a golden throne up in the sky, a white man who speaks English with a New England accent.

It is understandable that white males from New England should embrace such a picture. We believe that God roots for and has blessed the New England Patriots, a team with its own special “trinity.” We know that God works for healing in all people, but we know he is working extra hard to heal Tom Brady’s hand. I suspect that my dog pictures God as the Great Dog in the sky and pictures heaven as a realm with lots of chew toys and cats to chase. The cats probably have a very different picture of heaven. Some people have pictured heaven as a city with golden streets. I know gold is valuable to us here on earth, but why would it be valuable to God and of what value would it be in a life after death? Native Americans picture heaven not as a city, which they do not find appealing, but as a happy hunting ground, as fields and forests with lots of animals to hunt.

Several years ago my family gave me a sweatshirt for Christmas that reads, “So many books; so little time.” I think they were paying homage to my view of heaven as the great library in the sky with all the Great Books and lots of time to read!

We can picture God any way we want. We can picture God as masculine or feminine, as a man, a woman, or androgynous. We need to remember, however, that these pictures are not going to be totally accurate. God is neither a man nor a woman, neither white nor black, and God speaks neither English nor Spanish. These are ways in which we may have experienced God or ways in which we picture God. Obviously God “speaks” to us in our own language, or we would not understand what God is saying. We need to remember that, when we talk about God, we are only talking about our human experience of God, not God in his/her/its reality. This is why I attempt to avoid gender pronouns as much as possible in talking about God. I am only too aware of how our language not only shapes but also limits our belief and our faith.

The God described in the Old Testament is obviously masculine. This experience of God as masculine was an important advance in the evolution of human consciousness and religious understanding. However, it does not negate the hundreds of thousands of years in which God was experienced and understood as feminine, as the Great Goddess of nature.

Although I am aware that most tribal cultures, including the ancient Israelites, had their own small Gods, I am not particularly interested in these Gods. I am much more interested in what some mystics have called “the God beyond Gods.” I am interested in trying to build a relationship with that God who is the Ground of all Being, who gave rise to the universe, to life, and to human consciousness. This God is not a person, not a “he” or “she”, and not a thing, not an “it”. I am uncomfortable when I have to use these pronouns, but there is no way to avoid them if we are to speak of God at all.

I also believe that the God who was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth, the God who was revealed to us in Jesus’ life, teaching, death, and resurrection, was not a tribal warrior God, but the God beyond all Gods. When Friedrich Nietzsche, the existentialist philosopher, said, “God is dead,” I believe he was not talking about this bottom level God, the God beyond Gods, but about the tribal Gods which are really nothing more than idols. The Bible tells us time and time again, notably in the Ten Commandments, that we must not worship and build our life around idols, that we must continually smash the idols of our life to break through to the worship of the one true God. This bottom level God, the God who underlies and gave rise to all the nature and tribal Gods--this is the true God. I believe this is the God that Jesus would have us come to know.

I am going to have to continue these reflections next week. For now, I would just like to challenge us to think about our picture of God, our understanding of God and our beliefs about God. I challenge us to think about whether our picture or image of God is too small, and, if so, how this picture shapes and limits our faith.

I think this was the problem in ancient Israel with regard to Jesus. The God who was incarnate in Jesus, the God whom Jesus was trying to reveal and help us understand was so different from the tribal warrior God of ancient Israel or the pantheon of Roman Gods that the Hebrews and the Romans couldn’t accept it. Rather than allow their experience and their understanding of God to grow, they killed Jesus as a threat to their political-religious schema, just as the ancient Greeks killed Socrates for encouraging the youth of Athens to think.

Last week, in my commute home, I was listening to a radio talk show. The subject for the day was nudity in the arts. One woman who called in to protest against nudity defended her position on the grounds that God wore clothing. I think this makes my point about the limitations of our picture of God and our religious language quite well.

We need to reexamine our picture, our understanding of God. Some people think of God as the tribal deity of the United States, just as the Hebrews considered him to be the tribal God of Israel. Others, despite the message of the Gospel, picture a God who is a stern and demanding judge, a perfectionistic father who obsesses about sin, a wrathful tyrant who will punish them if they do something wrong or if they don't attend church on Sunday.

We all have our pictures of God, just like the little girl. As we prepare ourselves for the spiritual journey of Lent and Easter, we need to examine that picture, that image, and then open ourselves to the ways in which Jesus can help that picture to grow and evolve.

If we can do this, we will be able to enter more fully into the amazing Easter event, the greatest of all evolving re-experiences of God!

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January 21, 2018*